

Halo: Stand, Five Feet High

by soulguard

Category: Halo

Genre: Adventure, Mystery

Language: English

Status: Completed

Published: 2006-01-09 23:30:58

Updated: 2006-03-01 20:29:41

Packaged: 2016-04-27 00:18:36

Rating: T

Chapters: 10

Words: 58,184

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: Book 1: The Covenant Civil War has begun, and the grunts are caught in the middle. But something odd is happening to them, something that the elites must accept or fear. Savor your Grunty goodness.

## 1. Politics Part 1

**\*\*HALO: If I Were Your Hero**  
> <strong>Book 1

**\*\*"Stand, Five Feet High"**

**\*\*Politics\*\*** (Part 1)

High Charity

> Arrival at Delta Halo<p>

"Do you copy? Come in!" The shout was frantic and eager. Every elite in the communications hall peered toward the image of Regrets battleship as it lifted away from the massive crater where the temple once stood.

"We copy, commander." Came a shaky reply over the transmitter. The elite commander peered into the video display, and released a heavy sigh. His white armor glowed softly in the dim lights of the communications hall. At his side stood two elites, each displaying three parallel purple bars upon their right chest; the purple bars of the Mirrator. They were more than simple Special Operations warriors, they were best of the best and served only the high council; in secrecy and stealth.

A video display showed the elite ship master of Regret's battle group, and the commander once again felt an uncomfortable sensation. "Where is the holy one?"

"Commander, forgive me." The elite ship master lowered his head,

filled with shame. "We could not retrieve his holiness in time. The high prophet of Regret was slain by the demon. We destroyed the temple as the demon attempted to flee... "

"Damn it!" The commander shouted through his war torn mandibles. He slammed his fist upon the control panel and huffed in disapproval. Another elite stepped close to him and placed his hand upon his shoulder. The commander turned and looked into the eyes of the Mirratord Second in command; Rin Simyaldee.

Simyaldee had always been a good friend and a worthy leader of the Mirratord. His placement as the Mirratord Second, essentially the leader of all operations assigned to the Mirratord, was well earned. The secrecy of the Mirratord was the council's most guarded, and the Commander enforced it with brutal effectiveness; Simyaldee and the Commander were the most feared warriors on any battle field.

The commander looked at the hand of his friend and understood Simyaldee's intent. The death of a hierarch would not go unpunished, not if Truth had any thing to say about it; now was not the time to loose his focus and unleash his anger.

The ship master nervously continued, "Commander, we awaited the arrival of your phantoms and your warriors, but we received a command from the other Hierarchs. They ordered the destruction of the temple and the demon."

The commander clicked his two right mandibles together in thought. He looked back to the video of the ship master and realized that something more was happening behind the scenes, and the Hierarchs were directly responsible.

"Very well. Send several brigades of troops to the structure just beyond the Quarantine Zone. Make sure they are your most loyal soldiers and do not relay the coordinates to anyone. That will be our fall back point. I will send more troops soon."

"Commander, for what reason should..."

The Commander looked up the screen and nodded softly, "Trust me. I only hope that my fears to do not come to fulfillment."

"Yes commander."

The video faded and the Commander turned to Simyaldee. "These events will not fare well for the council."

Simyaldee spoke softly, "They have been observant of the hierarchs for quite some time. Perhaps now is the time to begin our operation."

"No." The commander thought hard and nodded for Simyaldee and the other Mirratord warrior to follow. They traversed out of the communication hall and spoke softly when they were alone. "For too long the council has feared this day. There is no telling what the hierarchs will do now that one of their own is dead. The demon has once again shamed us."

"Yes, but the demon is surely dead. Killed when the temple was destroyed. I only wish that I had been there to face him before his

death."

"I too brother. We have seen many of the demons die in this war, I am sure that another one will rise in its place. We will get our chance to face the demon, unless this Sacred Ring claims us first. But no matter, we will not begin our operation just yet. Let us go and speak with the Hierarchs. Even at this time we must seek their council."

Simyaldee agreed, but his heart was filled with doubt. "I fear it will not go well."

- - - - -

Sanctum of the Hierarchs  
> High Charity<p>

Truth floated toward a central pedestal and power downed 343 Guilty Spark. Guilty Spark suddenly stopped speaking and Truth turned to Mercy. The mood in the room was dreary, but not do to Regret's death. The information they had just recovered from Guilty Spark was most alarming and upsetting.

Truth rubbed the stubble upon his chin, "It would seem that our great leaders decided to make sure that only the Reclaimers can fire Halo. Their faith in those creatures knows no limits."

"We should have been done with them when we had the chance." Mercy barked.

"Indeed. But let this not alter the grand design. We will achieve our goals. But first we must do something about the elites."

"Their faith in us is waning. They will see through our deeds in time. Thanks to the humans' interference."

"Yes." Truth sighed. "The humans. Damned reclaimers."

"Silencing the heretic was a bold venture, and will sway many of the elites for some time, but I question this current move by the elite high council. What do you think?" Mercy questioned as he floated closer to Truth. Truth looked out of the massive view portal to the spinning ring world beyond. Halo floated majestically beyond in all of its awe inspiring glory.

"I think we should make a political move of power." Truth smiled. "Affective immediately the Brutes will serve as our personal protectors. Remove the elite Honor Guards."

"Yes, this will shake them to their core. The feud between the brutes and elites will be fueled indefinitely. Perhaps the elites will rebel against us..."

"And that will provide excellent cover for our plans." Truth smiled softly at this thought, the death of their brother, Regret, would play into their plans more then they thought possible. Mercy sent the transmission to the council and awaited a response. "Also send for the Arbiter. We will send him to retrieve the Icon. He will surely die on this quest."

"It is only a matter of time before the elites voice their opinion on this matter." Mercy gloated as he gazed at Halo's magnificent lines. "I have also sent for several skilled brutes to come and take the place of the elites guarding our chamber..." A loud beep filled the room and both Truth and Mercy turned toward the chamber door.

"Who is there?" Truth questioned.

"Your holiness, it is I, Commander of the Special Operation forces." The elites deep voice softly echoed around the room.

"Ah, yes Commander. Please enter." Truth looked to Mercy and they both nodded; agreeing to remain silent of their plans. The door to the Hierarchy's chambers parted, and in walked three elites. The leading elite wore the white armor of the elite commander and he was followed by two special operations elites. "This is an unexpected visit. We were in the middle of discussing our new arrangements with the council." As the elites neared Truth and Mercy, they all lowered themselves to one knee and bowed their heads respectfully.

"May I ask, your holiness, what plans?"

Truth floated forward, "We have selected new guards to protect us. The elites have been told to step down as our Honor Guards."

The commander stood tall as shock filled him, but he remained calm. "Your holiness, surely the council..."

"We are the leaders of this Covenant, Commander, or have you forgotten." Truth stated firmly. "The brutes are now our honor guards."

Mercy then interrupted, "I have just received word from the council. They are not pleased and are threatening to resign from the Covenant High Council."

Truth shook his head in a displeased fashion, "It seems that the elite council does not favor our decision, commander. But we stand by it. Tell them the events that has transpired here and make them understand."

The commander held back his frustration, "This is unprecedented... unacceptable."

"A hierarch is dead, Commander." Truth replied directly, not showing any sign of compassion. The doors parted once more and the Arbiter walked in behind the three elite warriors, but held his position close to the door. He listened intently but did not speak.

"His murderer was within our grasp. If you had not withdrawn our phantoms..."

"Are you questioning my decision?"

"No holy one. I only wish to express my concern that the brutes..."

Truth waved his hand and silenced the commander in mid statement. "Recommissioning the guards was a radical step. But recent events have made it abundantly clear that the elites can no longer guarantee

our safety."

The commander lowered his eyes, knowing that there was no longer any use in arguing. "I shall relay your... decision, to the council." The commander turned and began to walk out of the chamber; Simyaldee and the other warrior followed closely behind. As they approached the Arbiter, the Commander nodded toward him but continued to walk out of the Chamber. The Arbiter returned the gesture then began to walk toward the Prophets as the Commander and the two Mirrator warriors made their way to the chamber door.

They passed through the door and to their shock, the brutes had already taken the position of the Honor Guards. The brutes snarled as the three elites walked passed, but the Commander and Simyaldee showed no fear. The other elite warrior was young in the Spec Ops ranks and fresh from his induction into the Mirrator. He placed his hand on his energy sword hilt and Simyaldee placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Be calm, young one." The commander stated from in front of him. "Your anger is clear even when I'm not looking at you. You must remember your training. These brutes can smell your fear and nervousness." The young warrior lowered his hand from his hilt and they walked to a clearing, away from the brutes.

The commander verified that they were no longer within range of anyone and then spoke softly, "We don't have much time. The council must be informed immediately. Second, gather the Mirrator and get as many member of the elite council off of High Charity. Take them to the Knight and Piercing Arrow. Young one, contact Doz Yammaeda and tell him to prep the base for my arrival. He'll know what to do."

Simyaldee nodded to the Commander, "What do you think is happening?"

"I'm not sure. But I feel that a change of power is occurring. If so, then none of the elite councilors or the honored will be safe here."

"What about the councilors and honored warriors that have been sent to watch over the control room on the Sacred Ring?"

"We will do what we can for now. But first we must set up camp and prepare our base of operations. I will go with a platoon and see to it myself. Second, the Mirrator is in your hands. Guard the council as best you can." The three warriors parted ways, racing through the corridors of High Charity and unaware of the mission the Arbiter had just been assigned.

## 2. Politics Part 2

**\*\*Politics\*\***  
> Part 2<p>

Duties upon High Charity were of a simple affair, but even the easiest of tasks can seem extremely taxing to a grunt. Compared to the other Covenant warriors, the grunts stood an unimpressive five feet tall; their short legs supported a large, and toned, upper body.

Grunts had long oddly shaped arms and displayed surprising upper body strength, yet they were slow and often quite cowardly. But with everything going against the grunts they held one upper hand; one grunt was nothing to fear, but a pack was deadly. For this simple fact, grunts often traveled in groups of four or more. Their sense of bravery would be increased so long as the numbers were on their side, but a lone grunt would know his limits; a running grunt was common within the Covenant.

Deep within the lower levels of High Charity, a pack of four grunts tended to the deeds presented before them. Their duties were loading Phantoms with food and supplies for cruisers and capital ships. It was a typical venture for young non-combat grunts, deeds that would help them learn to follow orders and understand discipline.

Their duty day was quickly coming to an end, and after six hours of back breaking labor they were eagerly looking forward to spending the next few moments in the training halls. Compared to the manual labor of working the docks, combat training was a simple fare. The young pack of grunts waddled tiredly toward the lower levels of High Charity in silence. They passed several groups of elites that seemed displeased with something, but grunts learn at a very young age to not interfere with elite affairs.

But as they passed they heard one of the elite mumble, "... and the brutes have been assigned numerous ships to command. Half the fleet is now in their control..." The grunts heard these words, but paid them no mind.

At the head of the pack was Etah, the first born of the pack. Like all grunts, there was nothing special about Etah. Walking proudly at the front of the pack, he slowly navigated into the grunt combat training area. He walked on his knuckles, with his hoofs clicking upon the metallic floor, and sniffed the air questioningly. There was a new smell in the room, something that he found to be out of the norm. The smell was clearly an elite, but elite's rarely came into the grunt training areas; it was strange.

The elite turned the corner and looked to the group of four. Naturally the grunts seemed concerned as it was nothing new for elites to unleash their anger or frustration on a lone grunt. Reports of dead grunts was common, but no one questioned it; such acts were ignored.

The grunts nervously trembled at the sight of the elite. Its armor reflected the lights of the training room and cast a greenish hue from its yellow shine. He stepped forward, holding his head high and clasped his hands behind his back.

"Which of you is the eldest?" The elite's voice was deep, yet he spoke quietly.

Etah stepped forward, "Me... me first born." A stutter in his voice showed his nervousness.

"You and your pack are young, you have yet to be assigned a squad formation. I'm here to gain your loyalty and trust."

One of Etah's younger pack brothers stepped forward, "Why gain loyalty?" Etah quickly grumbled toward his younger brother, fearing

that the elite may become displeased.

"We have our reasons, young one. But now is not the time to dispute our motives. Eldest, do you have concerns? If so, I will push on and seek others."

"No, me not have concerns." Etah quickly stated.

The young grunt once again spoke out of turn, "But Etah, we not know what happening..." Etah elbowed the young grunt and snarled in disapproval.

"It seems your pack brother has doubts." The elite stated. "As elder, you should speak for him, but if he has concerns it may be best to leave you all behind. You must be sure of this decision to join us."

"Me eldest and we give loyalty." Etah stated firmly as he aggressively glared toward his younger brother. The young grunt quietly kept his peace.

"Very well. Beyond the training area you will see several of my brothers. All of whom are special operations. You will follow one of them to the docks and there you will receive your assignments. Dismissed!"

"We go." Etah turned and pushed his pack out of the training area, the three younger siblings stumbled upon themselves as he shoved. Quickly Etah began to snarl to his mouthy younger brother. "Do you not know that he could have killed us?" Etah nervously questioned in their native tongue.

"I wanted to know why they wanted our loyalty, Etah. Does it not seem odd to you?"

"Everything seems odd to you, Palab." Etah and his three pack brothers pushed on and met with the group of elite spec ops. The towering black armored elite nodded toward them and waved for them to follow.

"Etah, can I ask him what is going on?" Palab softly questioned. Etah gave a nervous grumble, but agreed. "Mighty one, what happening? We young pack, not ready for combat."

"The commander has given orders to assign several grunts to the sacred ring. You will be positioned at our base in order to defend it against the parasites. More information will be given when we arrive." Satisfied with the response, Etah stepped ahead of the pack and pushed Palab back in line. Etah wasn't angry at his younger brother, but he knew he had to keep him in line whenever they were around the elites. Palab was always curious, questioning and smart, sometimes too smart. On many occasions Palab would over step his bounds and speak to high ranking elites, the result of such acts is usually death, but Palab often found a way to avoid harm; usually by stroking the oversized ego of the offended elite.

They marched on for several minutes, passing by snarling Brutes and hissing jackals, but the elite ignored them all and maintained his calm. They arrived at the outer docks and were no longer strolling through the miles of High Charity's metallic tunnels. As they exited

the parting doors, the lower level docks opened before them. It was just as they had left it a few minutes earlier, only now it was crowded with elites, hunters and hundreds of grunts.

Dozens of phantoms and ships hovered throughout the area for as far as they could see. As they peered into the expanse they could cast their eyes downward and see the darkness of space through the hundreds of flickering shield gates that lined the base of the docking area. These gates served as gateways for phantoms and cargo transports.

A nearby phantom descended and several squads of special operations warriors emerged from a door on the opposite side of the landing platform. The lead elite, followed by several grunts all in a dark purple armor, raced toward the phantom but did not board. As Etah and his pack neared the phantom, they could see that something was happening and many elites were mobilizing; heading back into High Charity.

The elite leading Etah, and his pack, ran toward an elite wearing red armored. "What has happened? Are we mobilizing?"

The elite nodded with respect, he was the dock master and he seemed as though he were in shock. "Yes. Word has spread that the Demon is some where on board." He seemed increasingly nervous and twitched whenever a door opened.

"What? The Demon is here?"

"Yes, he was last reported inside the council chambers and interrupted Truth's sermon." The elite lifted his carbine, scanning it to make sure that it was ready for anything. "We have been ordered to gather at all surrounding hallways. But..." Again the dock master seemed lost in thought. He focused deeply on a set of elites that had entered on the opposite side of the dock. He was undeniably nervous.

The special operations elite stepped forward, "Speak."

"Forgive me, but the brutes have begun to attack our brothers whenever they attempt to take position within the hallways. They say they want to be the first to slay the Demon. But I fear that it is more then that."

"The Demon lives and now we must fight against the brutes because of their pride!" The elite roared in frustration. "How can the commander hope for us to continue at a time like this?" With a heavy sigh he regained his focus. "Very well, continue with your orders. I will transport any grunt packs that arrive."

"There are four more grunt packs and three spec ops squads that are on their way. Wait for them before you go to the ring."

A startled elite in blue armor ran from a nearby control room door, "Sir, we have word that Tartarus is ordering a section of brutes to take control of the docks! He says that he doesn't want the demon to escape." The elite shouted before he arrived.

The dock master snarled, "What! That barbarous creature has no authority!"



"None the less, they are coming. It is simply a ploy to take further resources away from us." The young blue armored elite added as he stood at the dock master's side.

"Dock master, the commander needs these troops. Surely the brutes will not allow us to disembark."

"Agreed." The dock master nodded. He turned to the young elite at his side, "Notify all dock hands, to take up arms and defend all entrances to the docks." The young elite nodded and raced back to the control station as the dock master faced the spec ops elite. "Gather your pilots and get your grunts aboard the phantoms. The others should be here shortly."

"I will stay and help defend the docks until they arrive. However, I would much like to hunt the Demonâ€|"

"No. The commander has given you orders, just as he has to me. We are to get as many regiments to the ring as possible. I wish he would have told me what he was planningâ€|"

The doors behind Etah and his pack parted and six elites stormed in. A group of blue armored elites greeted them at the door, weapons at the ready but none threatening.

It is said that wars are started with words, but no one is eager to fire the first shots. Many brutes and elites have killed each other after verbal disputes, but such is the life of a warrior in the covenant; their bonds are fragile.

Etah glared at the elites and brutes, but couldn't hear what was being said. Every elite, hunter and grunt standing upon the docks was eager to know what was being said, and the dock master sprinted to see what he could do to stall the brutes. He ran closer to the brutes and stepped passed the six elites.

There was a deathly silence within the docks, no shouts, no uproars, nothing. It was the calm before the storm. Throughout the expanse of High Charity, hundreds of elites and brutes were fighting, but their reasoning was to be the first to kill the Demon, but the struggle in the docks would prove to be the real deciding moment of what would become the Covenant civil war.

A ship wide communication opened and Truth's voice echoed across the docks, "Fear not my brothers, for the Sacred Icon is secure. It was Tartarus and his Brutes who took the Icon from the Flood. For this, they have our thanks." The communication ended and every elite glared at each other, seemingly dumbfounded by the words.

"What is this?" The spec ops elite stated through snarled teeth. "Not only have they dishonored our honor guards, but now they gain the favor of the Hierarchs?" He spat as he gripped his plasma rifle. He turned to Etah, "Get your grunts aboard the phantom."

Etah nodded and quickly grabbed Palab, not trusting that his younger brother would keep his mouth shut. The group waddled to the nearby Phantom, other grunt packs were doing the same, but Etah and Palab could not take their eyes off of the elites and brutes near the door.

Again, Truth spoke over the ship wide communicator, "The elites have failed to protect the Prophets, and in so doing put all our lives at risk. Let no warrior forget his oaths. Thou, in faith, will keep us safe whilst we find the path."

"What are they saying?" Palab mumbled in their native tongue. Behind him stood Etah and his other pack brothers, but also several other grunt packs that were waiting to board the phantom. "The holy one speaks as if the elites have betrayed them."

"You do not know that, Palab." Etah returned, gripping his younger brother and pulling him closer to the gravity lift. The purple hue of the lift created an eerie glow around the grunts, but everything was slowly beginning to take shape in Palab's mind. But the Elites could also sense that something was not right.

The spec ops elite roared as he began to understand. "By the rings! The commander, he knew this was coming!" The spec ops elite turned to Etah. "Quickly, board the phantom. There isn't much time!" With that the opposite door to the dock parted and dozens of brutes marched in. They were greeted by several elites, and again Etah and Palab could not hear what was being said.

"Damned brutes, they mean to fight!" The spec ops elite grumbled.

Once more Truth spoke, "With my blessings, the Brutes now lead our fleets. They ask for your allegiance, and you shall give it to them." Every elite within the dock seemed to boil with disapproval. It was as they had feared. The Brutes had taken the favor of the Hierarchs, but there was a darker side to this act, one that only the special operations elites could understand.

Etah pushed and tugged the younger grunts into the gravity lift, forcefully at times. Palab continued to glare at the massing horde of brutes and elites on each side of the dock. The door was quickly filling with brutes and more elites were heading toward them. A powder keg had been lit, and its fuse was about to make contact with its explosive charge. There was no way around it, no way to predict the outcome and no way to stop it.

Truth spoke, "Creatures of the Covenant, the path is clear, and we shall walk it side by side." The spec ops elite ran toward the dock master, sprinting as fast as he could. He had to warn him, to tell him that it was a trap. He had to pull the elites away from the door. "At this moment, the Council is gathered on Halo to see the Icon Safely placed."

The spec ops elites reached through the crowd of elites. "Pull back! Get away from them. Dock master!" Yet his words were would not arrive in time.

The burly voice of the Brute Chieftain sounded over the com, "Rise, my brothers! Cast down the Elites!"

No one knew who fired the first shot, brute or elite, but it was no longer a concern. Plasma flowed between the two walls of warriors. There was nowhere to run, no way to get away from the waves of super heated plasma fire that streaked between the two ferocious combatants. At one time they served as allies, but now a blood feud

had been uncorked.

For the brutes, years of lingering in the shadow of the elites had been put to rest. No longer were they second, no longer would they be kept out of the Hierarchs' graces, and now they could release their anger.

For the elites, it was insult to their pride. They were the glory of the Covenant, and the instruments of the prophets' will. They had been betrayed, outcast and thrown to the ground. The brutes were beneath them, but they had been lifted above them in one swift movement of Truth's frail hands.

Elites fell backwards, shields overloaded and vanished, and their blood soaked the metal floors. Brutes were torn in half, limbs singed off by plasma the hair smoking in a flash of dieing cells. Roars came from both sides, anger and curses even before death. If their spirits had substance, they would fight even in death. Hatred. Hatred in its truest form was spilling from each the massive warriors.

The spec ops elite felt the pounds of red plasma rushing across his shields. He reached out and gripped the dock master's shoulder and pulled him back. The elites began to gather the senses and began to back away from the doors and sought cover. Plasma grenades littered the doorway but the brutes had already pulled back. The cascading explosion melted part of the door, causing it to jam open. The elite then ran to guard the dock master and the special operations elite as they retreated. The spec ops elite suddenly felt that dock masters incredible weight slump behind him, and turned to see that he was dead; laying face down with a trail of purple-blue blood behind him. He was holding on to the arm of a long dead corpse.

"It will not end this way, brother." The spec ops elite released the dock master's lifeless limb, realizing that he had probably died in the first volley of fire. He lifted his plasma rifle and fired a round into the door as a brute attempted to rampage into the room. The brute met a slaughtering end as dozens of wounded, yet resilient, warriors fired into it. The brutes on the opposite side of the door began to fire back with brute shots and three of the weapons deadly arsenals exploded near the spec ops elite. He was tossed back as his shield overloaded and shrapnel splint through his left side. He roared in agony as he dropped his weapon and crawled back toward the phantom.

Palab had watched it all, and he watched as the elite crawled back to the phantom. This was combat. He had never seen it before, and his training could not have prepared him for it. Etah brushed passed him and quickly waddled toward the wounded spec ops elite.

"Etah, no!" Palab grumbled. "The brutes are coming!"

"We need him to fly the ship, Palab! Help me!" Etah gripped the wounded warrior and began to pull him toward the phantom.

"Elites do not care for us. Why should we help him?"

"Because without him we will die here!" Etah's words cut through Palab's moment of fear. He was right. None of the young grunts could pilot the phantom, and the brutes would certainly kill them. Palab tossed his fear to the wind and grabbed the elite. Other phantoms,

carrying hunters, elites, and grunts, were lifting off as the dock hands continued to fight back against the growing brute numbers.

As Etah and Palab rose in to the Phantom's belly, the last voice they heard was from Truth, "There are those who said this day would never come. What are they to say now?"

### 3. Earn your place

\*\*\*"Earn your place."\*\*

An hour passed since the young pack of grunts descended to the Sacred Ring, and already they were to be shuffled into action. Constant flood attacks near the edge of the base were weakening the perimeter defenses, and the young pack was next in line to fill in.

The base selected by the elite Spec Ops Commander, was near the edge of Halo's Quarantine Zone, and flood attacks were often. The base was a large structure made of stone ruins and numerous underground pathways that lead into the metal lower lairs of Halo. It was a vast sanctuary just beyond the massive dark walls of the flood filled zone. Had the prophets not ordered the Arbiter to deactivate the shielding around the Quarantine Zone, flood attacks would have been nil, but that was only wishful thinking now.

Proving his leadership ability, Etah had been assigned to chief of the vehicle bay and supplies. He was stationed toward the center of the base, near the massive tower that served as the elite's command center. However, Palab and his other brothers were sent off as lambs to the slaughter, and stationed at the lone building closest to the massive wall of the Zone. Numerous attacks had occurred there, and dozens of grunts had perished at the hands of the flood. This was their place, their duty. Any grunt that couldn't carry its own weight was quickly ordered to the front lines; as cannon fodder, despite their age and experience.

The wailing of the flood could be heard throughout the room. It sent a chill down every grunt's spine, but the two spec ops elites brushed aside their shock and dismay. Warriors like them would not be caught dead showing their weakness in such a time. But four feet beneath the heads of those mighty elites stood four cowering grunts.

"This sacred ring will not be our graves." One of the elites roared in protest of the flood outcries.

"Confident, he is." Palab snorted. His muffled words caught the attention of the Elite.

"Battle is among us. The flood is drawing closer. Palab, get your pack into position." Doz Yammaeda, the spec ops elite in charge of defending the area, barked his orders without any sign of fear or nervousness. But Palab knew differently. His pack was the third to be ordered to this position ever since they arrived on the Sacred Ring. And on top of that the brutes were killing his brood brothers on High Charity, he and his pack had just barely escaped to a ship and were then transported to the ring world. Palab stomped the ground with his fists and pushed off the troubled thoughts. Without Etah around, Palab was a pack leader and he had his orders.

"You two bring artillery. Load many grenades in hand. We defend this door." He ordered the other three grunts and they quickly moved into positions. The far side of the crumbling stone building was broken down and a doorway exposed the interior wall of the Quarantine Zone's defense. The door was clearly an entry way into the zone, but it had been sealed many years ago. But now, with the shield down and the flood free to roam, the doorway was a weakness that had to be guarded.

Palab watched as his two pack brothers moved their turrets to guard the doorway, "We only thing between flood and base. We do good job and food nipple for everyone." Palab was third born and had one other older brother, but he was soft spoken and terrified of battle; not worthy of leading the pack in Etah's absences. Thusly, Palab assumed the role of pack leader.

His pack of grunts primed their weapons, charged the two plasma turrets and howled a battle cry as the flood in the hallway wailed again. The two Special Operation elites, clad in black armor, stood behind Palad and his pack and pulled out their plasma swords. The two mighty elites began to wort with anticipation, knowing that they would be fighting in close quarters and only the hissing of their plasma swords would give them the edge in battle.

Base camp was well defended. Each entryway into the ruins was covered with a battalion of grunts and elites. But once Etah, Palab and the other comany of grunts arrived on the ring, information was quickly spread that the Elites were no longer in command. The Brutes were now the favorite of the Prophets.

The Special Operations Commander knew that something wasn't right, and his actions had been justified. His hunch was given full merit when Tartarus, Chieftain of the Brutes, pulled all of his warriors away from the Quarantine Zone and stationed them near Halo's command center. The High Council had feared these actions and they had warned the commander that this could happen. The Prophets were betraying their oath to the Covenant, and an eradication of the elites would be eminent. Now the commander had a new purpose, he had to defend his base from the flood, stop the brutes from taking the Control Room, and wait for orders from the High Council. Added to that, there had been no word from the Arbiter since he ventured into the Library. Surely, he was a victim of the Prophets betrayal, and the commander was the last to see him alive.

Stationed on the southern side of the ruins, the room grew quite as Spec Ops elite Doz Yammaeda and his squad held their position. Anticipating the flood's action was hard but Yammaeda had experience with dealing with the parasites. They had been attacking for the better part of twelve hours and the odor from their rotting corpses filled his nostrils with delight. Yammaeda had stopped counting how many of the combat forms he had cut down since the flood began their assault on the base, but he had great satisfaction in predicting their advance, and surviving to slaughter more.

The Spec Ops Commander was wise to appoint Yammaeda to this locale. He knew that Doz Yammaeda was an excellent strategist when it came to being in tight quarters combat, and had high favor in the experienced elite; so much so that he was going to invite Yammaeda into the secret order of the Mirrator; an honor among honors. Sadly, the trouble with the prophets began and such deeds would have to wait.

The Commander had sent in three waves of Grunts to support Yammaeda, and only one Elite warrior had died under Yammaeda's command; a great deed considering the numerous flood attacks. But what the commander was not aware of was that this latest Grunt support pack would be an advantage unlike any the covenant had seen.

Palab and his pack waited at the door to base camp. The two turret gunners stared closely down the barrel and through the door. Palab, with an uncharged plasma grenade in hand, crawled to the side of his nearby pack brother. They both stood a few feet behind the turret gunners.

"You see enemy?" Palab questioned. Palab didn't hear a response, so he poked the grunt in the side; startling the grunt awake.

"YAAHAA!" The grunt screamed, charging his Plasma pistol and aiming in all directions.

"No time for sleeping. You sleep, we die. Me no die here." Palab yelled at his groggy older brother, at his side.

The older grunt sighed, "Enemy no come. We wait here for hours. Me see no enemy." Palab was about to agree with his pack brother when one of the turret gunners screamed.

"ENEMY! Hereâ€¦ you see, you see?"

The doorway was soon crawling with flood infection forms, and the two turret gunners began to quickly fire into the lot of them. Yammaeda watched closely, knowing what was to come next. He looked to his Elite brother and nodded his head, tightening his grip on the energy sword. The spec ops elite at his side returned the gesture and they both crouched and moved toward the door. Soon the combat forms would come, and they would be ready to face them.

Palab looked to his pack brother and they both tossed plasma grenades into the entrance with expert precision. The grenades made short work of the infection forms and Palab sighed in relief. He was taken by surprise, but thankfully his other pack brothers stayed sharp at the turrets. This was his first encounter with the enemy but his training had paid off. He was a skilled grenade thrower and could fire his plasma pistol with great speed and accuracy.

"More enemies!" The turret gunners shouted, but this time their shouts were subsided by the wails of the flood combat forms. The mutated creatures charged up the ramp and into the door but were quickly met by pounds of plasma fire by the two turret grunts. Palab and his brother tossed two grenades behind the first row of combat forms.

Palab quickly shouted, "Heads up!" The grenades exploded between the flood ranks and sent several of the combat forms across the grunts' heads; landing at Yammaeda's feet. Doz Yammaeda and his Elite brother wasted no time and slashed the charred bodies with their plasma swords, giving the creatures no time to spawn.

Yammaeda looked to Palab with total shock. \_"Had the grunt planned for that to happen?"\_ He thought to himself. The explosion not only destroyed several combat forms, but it also divided the flood ranks, making them easy pickings for the turret gunners. When the last

combat form was seared with plasma fire, Palab and his pack cheered happily. They had faced their first wave and survived.

Doz Yammaeda stepped forward, "Palab, there is no time for celebration. This victory is momentary. Dispose to the flood bodies or we will have more to deal with in the next fray."

"Yes Sir." Palab stated to his commanding officer. He turned to his pack. "Come, we destroy them. You two stay on turret, watch our backs."

"Me no like this." Palab's older brother stated nervously. "You know what they say, where one flood, always more."

"We have orders, do as told, we live longer." Palab replied. The two grunts scurried down the ramp and surveyed the room; switching their plasma pistols for needlers. "Me no seen nothing. Destroy bodies fast!" Palab and his brother scurried from body to body, their hoofs clapping on the stone floor with every step. They emptied their guns into flood bodies and the needler's charged crystals exploded with gruesome results. But unknown to the two grunts, one infection form survived. The infection form pulled its bulbous form from a dismantled human body and scurried across the room toward the two unsuspecting grunts.

"Behind you!" One of the turret gunners screamed, but it was too late. The Infection form stabbed its tentacle into the eldest brother and the grunt screamed in pain.

"Get it off, get it off, get it off!" The grunt screamed but was quickly subdued by the tiny creatures attack method. It injected its toxins into the grunt's spine and slowly began to take over his body.

"I no let you!" Palab slapped the bulb on the creature with the hilt of his needler and it exploded in a mist of green decay. His action wasn't fast enough and the infection forms toxins had completely overwhelmed the grunts body. He was slowly swelling as the parasites toxins were transforming him into what would be a nest of flood spores. The nest was a sack of lumpy flesh without thought or consciousness, and brewed spores that would turn the air into a thick mist of infectious spores. Palab had no time to mourn the death of his pack brother as more combat forms could be heard running down the path toward his position.

"Palab, fall back!" Yammaeda yelled. "More of the creatures are coming."

Palab pulled all the grenades from his brother's side satchel and began to scamper up the ramp into the room. He turned and tossed a grenade at the slowly contorting body of his fallen comrade, to ensure that the flood would not claim his body and continued up the ramp. The grenade exploded and Palab looked up at Yammaeda.

Yammaeda could only reply, "His great journey has begun. You will avenge him in the next battle." The four grunts had just celebrated a victory, only to have one of their elder brothers killed by a lone flood infection form. Yammaeda had never seen grunts so quiet. Many of them had died in the war, many had died that day, but this pack seemed oddly connected. Palab returned to his brothers' side, and stood between the two plasma turrets. They had nothing to say and

were clearly upset at the death of one of their own.

The Elite looked to his fellow warrior and felt some apprehension about notifying command of what had transpired. Grunts were always connected and stuck to their packs, but a display of remorse had not yet been seen by an elite's eyes. It had been believed that grunts had their own way of dealing with their dead and dared to not share it with the rest of the covenant. The Grunts knew their place, they were cannon fodder, used only to reduce an enemy's numbers and pave the way for battle hardened elites, but until now, they never seemed to dwell long on the death of their fallen. But Yammaeda's thoughts would have to wait.

"We fight. Enemies here!" Palab suddenly shouted as combat forms rushed up the hill. This time caring weapons, and using cover fire. "Reposition turrets. Enemies hide. Not need turrets at door. Fall back." Palab barked his orders and the two turret gunners obeyed. Palab supplied cover fire for his pack as they repositioned the guns at an angle out of reach of the flood's fire.

Yammaeda and his elite brother switched to their plasma rifles and supported Palab; standing behind him as they fired into the tunnel. Palab tossed a grenade near the door and also retreated to the fall back position. The grenade exploded and the two elites joined Palab and the two turret gunners.

"We wait here, sir. You get support. We hold off enemies tell you return." Palab spoke. Yammaeda was about to rebuke the grunt for speaking as if to give orders, but the little grunt began to fire his weapon and toss grenades without much concern for his elite commander. A lone bullet struck Yammaeda's shield and he crouched behind a stone pillar.

"Stay and support, brother." Doz Yammaeda stated to the elite at his side. "I will go to the Communications Array and call for back up." His platoon was large but the area they covered was larger, so he had to divide his platoon into smaller squads. He was more concerned with the human threat on the Sacred Ring, but the flood menace was becoming overwhelming. The flood seemed driven and much smarter than the records had stated. The one time General had not recorded how intelligent the flood were.

Palab picked up a nearby plasma pistol and fired into the combat form that had breached the door. He was soon assisted by one of the turret gunners. His pack was holding their own but it would have been much better had they had their fourth brother.

"We no die here!" Palab screamed as he tossed another grenade into the door way. The explosion gave the pack a few seconds to think and Palab realized he no longer had any grenades left. He snarled in disapproval.

"Palab, here, take mine." One of the turret gunners stated as he removed his satchel from his armor and slid it too Palab. It was an odd gesture to see a grunt part with its spare grenade satchel, but the connection they shared was once again defying grunt logic.

"Me make good use of these." Palab cheered.

"More enemies! There, in upper window!" The other gunner yelled.



Above Palab's pack formation was a group of combat forms, standing on the roof window.

"What!" The elite barked. "The roof defense squad must have been beaten. Cursed parasites!" The flood combat forms leapt from the upper ledge and upon the group. The turret gunners took aim and fired as they fell. Palab knew this wasn't good. In close combat his grunts would be massacred. The elite pulled out his plasma sword and began slicing the flood, but with every two he killed six would take its place. Palab then noticed that the flood were now advancing through the door that they had been defending for the past hour. Things were not looking good.

"Get away from turrets. We need bait." Palab shouted to his pack. The two grunts jumped away from the guns and retreated to Palab's position; flailing their arms in the air as they ran.

"RUNAWAY!" One of the grunts yelled as he panicked. Palab was confused and looked behind him. He then saw what spooked his pack brother. The elite was overwhelmed with combat forms and was swinging his sword wildly at anything that came near him. He suddenly roared in pain and collapsed to the floor as the flood finally took him down. The monstrous creatures wasted no time in turning their attention to Palab and his small pack.

"The elite is dead! Runaway!" The other grunt shouted with a panicked tone. The strength of the elite was gone. His pack now felt powerless against the much larger flood forms. But Palab stood his ground; snarling in frustration.

"We no die here!" Palab reached for a grenade and tossed it at the turret. "Grenades, throw all grenades!" Palab shouted to his pack. The other two grunts calmed down briefly and tossed grenades at the charging flood and plasma turrets.

The swelling charge of plasma glowed brightly and rippled throughout the room, as the turret guns and several grenades exploded. The cascading explosions knocked Palab and his brothers off their feet. The grenades and plasma charges on the turrets had leveled half of the combat forms, and put a small crater in the stone floor.

"Get to exit door. We hold position there. Wait for support." Palab barked his orders and his pack found a renewed sense of strength. The flood combat forms, off balance and confused, stumbled around until they spotted the small group of grunts running to the door. They attacked.

The room was again filling with flood combat forms and Palab couldn't begin to count them. They poured from the upper window and cascaded through the door on the opposite side of the room. Palab could feel the tension boiling over his pack brothers as the flood charged toward them. Palab wanted to retreat, he wanted to run, but with so many flood forms in this one building all the packs of grunts in the base would be killed.

Three grunts against hundreds of floods, the odds were horrible. Palab could feel his pack brothers trembling at his side, staring at the onslaught of charging flood combat forms. The flood wailed and their gargled screams echoed throughout the chamber. The rumble under their feet echoed as they stampeded toward them. Palab and his two

brothers stood at the door. Behind them was the open sky of halo and the base camp with hundreds of unsuspecting elites, hunters and other packs of grunts. Did Yammaeda have time to notify the base and get support? Did the roof squad call for backup before they were defeated?

No time to dwell on such things. Palab thought to himself.

"We no die here!" Palab picked up an elite plasma rifle that had landed near the door after the explosion, and then primed a grenade. His pack fallowed suit. They opened fire and tossed their last grenades. The grenades exploded in the midst of a group of flood and a soft rumble was heard; not the rumble of stampeding creatures, but the sound of tumbling stone. The flood were now a few feet away and the rumble from the three grenades grew louder. Suddenly the roof of the building caved in on top of the flood. Palab and his squad hopped backward and were covered by dust and debris as the stones crumbled upon the nest of flood forms. Another rumble came from beneath them, much louder then the first and the building slowly began to collapse deeper into the ground. The stone path at Palab's feet began to crumble away and he pushed his brothers back a few more feet. Dust erupted into the air and obscured their vision.

"What you do?" One of Palab's pack brothers questioned.

"Me not know." Palab replied. "Maybe building old, too many grenades weaken it." The three grunts looked at each other, then at the rubble now several feet beneath them as the dust settled. Bubbles of flood decay oozed throughout the sinkhole on the opposite side stood stranded combat forms eagerly looking for a way around the pit, but there was no path for them. Palab and his pack howled and cheered and danced as they marveled at their own survival.

"We live, but we lost our brother." Palab softly stated. "We not forget him in battles to come."

Doz Yammaeda with several Hunter pairs, and dozens of Spec-Ops elites, climbed the hill to the building and spotted the three Grunts cradling their heads as if they were sleeping. Yammaeda then noticed that the building was leveled and all of the flood dead, or trying to find away around the sinkhole.

"Divide the squads and begin destroying the parasites on the other side of the thisâ€| hole." Yammaeda stated to one of the Elites. "Hunters, blast this pit with your weapons and eradicate any of the parasites that remain." He then climbed the shill and nudged Palab on the shoulder. "How can you sleep now? What has happened here?"

"We not sleep, weâ€| uhh, can not say." Palab stated softly, realizing that he had almost said too much.

"Then I order you to tell me what happened here?" Yammaeda stated. "I had not expected to see this area secure."

"Simple, sir." Palab stated as he stood to his feet, with his pack brothers standing at his side. "We no die here!" Doz Yammaeda looked at the happy pack of grunts and nodded an approval.

"Very well." Yammaeda replied. "The commander is setting up a strike team to take with him to the Control Room, and your pack has proven

itself most useful in combat. The Brutes await us at the control room, so we will be leaving most of the grunts behind. Palab, I appoint you as pack leader of this platoon. Go into base and see the commander, he will give you your orders."

The three grunts waddled down the hill and into base camp. Palab held his head high as he passed his other pack brothers. It was if they immediately knew of the honor bestowed upon him, and several of them followed him to meet with the commander. At the central tower, the center of the base, Palab and several other grunts stood at the door to await the commander's summon. In the distance several Phantom's hovered above the ground as other grunts loaded supplies and vehicles for the elite's mission to the control room. Palab quickly spotted Etah ordering other grunts in where to load supplies, but Etah was extremely busy and did not see Palab.

Through the darkness of the command center door, walked several spec ops elite. But some were different, their armor and stance seemed much more aggressive and mysterious. Palab had never seen these special operations elites before, and their dark purple armor seemed to radiate mystery. The last elite to exit was the commander. His white armor glistened in the sun once he exited the darkness of the command center. His team trotted off to the phantoms as he looked down at Palab and clicked his two right mandibles together. He had a presence that no other elite had displayed in Palab's eyes and even his eyes seemed to glow with an odd radiance. Clearly, this was an elite to be feared.

"Sergeant Palab, I believe?" The commander questioned. Palab looked around and pointed to himself.

"Sergeant?" Palab was dumbfounded. A grunt being called a Sergeant was only spoken of by the grunts of legend.

"You advised Yammaeda to get help while you and your pack stood your ground against the flood. Yet against such forces, you now stand hereâ€¦ very much alive." The commander looked to the phantoms in the distance, and his mind filled with worry. The councilors were left alone to fend for themselves at such a time. He had to move quickly. "The Covenant is not what it once was. A new chain of command must be established if we are to survive this treachery, even the grunts must look for leadership. Palab, you and your grunts will defend base camp until I notify you otherwise. I'm taking one platoon of grunts with me, and leaving the rest. I'm also leaving four hunters in your care. If you have any questions speak with Yammaeda, he is still your superior and head of operations now." The commander walked off, his hands clasped behind his back. "We depart for the control room and to save the councilors. The brutes must be punished. I fear there is more at play here than we were led to believe." The commander and his strike force loaded the Phantoms and soared off to battle.

Palab looked to the top of the hill and could see Yammaeda and his squad returning from cleaning up the remaining flood, and then Palab felt it. He felt the eye of every grunt staring at him, marveling at what he had done. He had earned the respect of the elites. To become a Sergeant in the eyes of the mighty warrior elites was to be recognized as a warrior and to be seen as more than a simple grunt; he had earned respect.

"We wait for Sergeant Yammaeda, he give orders, and we follow." Palab

shouted as loudly as his muffled lips could. The grunts obeyed and waited for the elite to descend from the hill. But one thing was for sure, at least for now, one Grunt stood taller than all the rest.

#### 4. No Ordinary Grunt

\*\*"No ordinary Grunt"\*\*

Streaking across the sky, a lone phantom quickly soared toward the now brute controlled region near the control room. Several banshees piloted by brutes greeted the phantom and escorted it toward Halo's main fort, while inside the phantom the roar of the brute chieftain filled the bay, "These pathetic elites are beneath us." Tartarus bellowed into his com terminal. The massive silver haired Brute towered over Miranda Keys as their Phantom sped toward the control room. Keys flinched as the Brute snarled and roared at another brute on the other end of his communications uplink. "The prophets have made their choice, eradicate them. Destroy them all!"

"Yes Chieftain." The Brute replied from the uplink.

"So it would appear that the elite's commander has been quite busy on Halo." Tartarus thought aloud to himself, Commander Miranda Keys couldn't help but overhear. "Curse those Special Operations elites, they've been operating outside of the Hierarchs' wishes. He's built a base and amassed a formidable force without their knowledge. No matter, soon the Sacred Ring will fire. Thanks to thisâ€¦ human." Tartarus grabbed Miranda by the head, pulling her closer to him.

"Please be gentle with the reclamer." 343 Guilty Spark snapped from beneath a brute's arm. "The reclamer is needed in order to joinâ€¦."

"Silence!" Tartarus roared toward the small glowing orb. Guilty Spark had personally seen how barbaric the beast was and remained silent; not willing to test his anger further.

The brute's massive strength was impossible to resist as Miranda slammed into its side, but she didn't care at this point, he wouldn't kill her. For some reason, he needed her alive, but something else was on her mind. Commander Keys was already thinking of a back up plan to her situation. The Brute spoke of a base, and a commander within the Elite ranks. In Amber Clad was sunk, very little could be done about that, but perhaps she could find aid in another source. If the Covenant was in some form of Civil War then perhaps the Elites could be of some use to her.

- - - - -

The weather was once again perfect on Delta Halo. Base camp was secure, and the only thing Palab had to worry about was the battle that loomed in orbit of the massive ring world. Within the central methane tent, Palab sighed and took a deep breath of un-recycled Methane. So many of his brethren were dying above his head, the battle seemed to have no end. The Holy City of High Charity etched in the shadows of the Sacred Ring and plumes of red and orange dotted the sky around it. The battle was intense. The elites and grunts out

numbered the brutes, but the brutes had power, strength and those stupid jackals and drones at their side.

Palab leaned back on his cushion and closed his eyes. He stuck a finger in his ear and rubbed it aggressively. He then pulled his finger out and sniffed it; laughing at the curious smell.

"Etah." Palab stated to the nearby grunt. "You smell." Etah leaned closer and smelled Palab's finger.

"Ewww gross!" Etah laughed. "Smell mine!" Etah then reached into his ear and repeated Palab's action. The two grunts laughed comically at each other and enjoyed the unusual free time they had.

The atmosphere inside the methane tent was relaxed. And while it was nothing like the home world they dreamed of, it did give the grunts the freedom of walking around without their cluttered masks and armor. None of the grunts in this platoon had ever seen their home planet, they were front line soldiers. They were born on High Charity after the human war had started, and could only dream of what their home was really like.

Palab thought of his mentor, Kokoz. He was something of a father figure to the pack and told many stories of their home world. Kokoz had seen many battles in his lifetime and his stories and tutelage was extremely useful, but Palab and his pack were young when they met him, and their memories of him were fuzzy.

Grunts matured quickly and the average age of a grunt that was ready for combat was eight weeks. But most grunts within the covenant never lived to the ripe old age of twenty. The oldest grunt within the covenant was seven, and he was considered a breeder so he saw very little combat. But times had changed and perhaps the time would come that the grunts would be permitted to go home and see their home world with their own eyes.

Palab and Etah, walked over to the food dispenser. They each grabbed a small bowl and pressed a small button at eye level. A funnel then slid from within the wall of the food dispenser; hanging over the table where the grunts laid their bowls. Etah watched as the funnel began to slowly squeeze out his meal and he attacked it. He gripped the dispenser in his claw and squeezed it until a pasty substance was forcefully propelled into his bowl.

"Etah, you that hungry?" Palab questioned. "Food nipple break, I make you fix."

"Me still eldest." Etah laughed. "If me break, me make you fix." Etah picked up his bowl and sniffed the meal aggressively. "Me not get ration yesterday. Me over slept. Yammaeda not happy and make me work longer." He waddled to a nearby pack of grunts, all of them eating various colors of the pasty substance. Palab patiently waited for the food nipple to slowly squeeze out the paste. He was growing increasingly frustrated at how slow the paste was falling and grabbed the end of the rubber funnel aggressively; forcefully squeezing the substance out faster and into his bowl. Palab then looked down the line at the other food dispensers and watched as some of the other grunts, which were less impatient, actually begin to suck their ration of food out of the dispenser with their mouths. The food nipple was a staple of all grunt methane tents. With so many grunts

within the Covenant it was increasingly difficult to feed them all. The synthesized food nipple became the best option to keeping the grunts feed and ready for battle. Its nutrient rich contents provided a grunt with a full days worth of vitamins and minerals, and the different colors represented the different flavors. Palab didn't care, he just wanted to eat.

After giving the paste a quick sniff, Palab joined his pack brother, a small circle of grunts and sat down on the soft plastic floor. The other grunts looked at Palab curiously, almost as if they were in awe. Palab could only gaze back at them; confused. Etah simply ate his paste.

"You're the great Sergeant that everyone is talking about." A smaller grunt stated in their natural tongue. "Why are you eating with us?" Palab didn't know how to answer. "The elites respect you and gave you a rank in their chain of command. You're different from us. You should be eating with them."

"I'm still a grunt to the elites." Palab responded. He didn't like where the conversation was going and he didn't like the attention that the other grunts were giving him.

"He is right, Palab." Etah added as he licked paste from his fingers.

"He's not right." Palab countered.

"He is right!" Etah snapped. "I've known you all of your life and you've always been smarter and not scared of the elites." Etah's words cut deep into his younger pack brother. Palab knew that if anyone knew him better than he knew himself, it was his older brother Etah. "You were the first to walk, and to explore High Charity. You were the first to speak and you— you were the first at everything. I love you Palab, and I'm telling you the truth; you are special. You were born two hours after me but you are the best at everything."

Palab was speechless. Everyone seemed to be supporting him but at the same time he felt horrible about it. He didn't want to be special, he wanted to be like his brothers. "You can make things better for us all. You can show the elites that we should be treated right." Etah turned his gaze back to his empty bowl. As pack leader it was his role to lead the pack, to be the best at everything, but Palab was clearly his superior. He was smart, and skilled in combat, even the elites had seen it. Unlike Palab, Etah had only received a small promotion, but Palab had been given an official rank; a Sergeant. It was unheard of for a grunt to receive such a thing from the elites.

The inner door to the methane tent opened and a lone grunt in red armor hurriedly waddled in.

"Palab, sir." The grunt spoke directly to Palab in his best covenant speak. "Yammaeda calling. He need you at tower. Urgent!" Palab looked to the group and quickly tossed back his last bit of paste.

"I go now." Palab replied. "Etah, you come later."

"Yes sir." Etah replied with a soft sigh.

Palab knew that Etah was only following the discipline of his rank, but he hated his older pack brother calling him Sir. Palab shuffled on all fours till he arrived at his locker near the exit of the tent. He pulled on his black armor and attached his face mask. Without asking for assistance, a nearby grunt quickly adjusted his Methane mixture and output, from the controls on his back. Palab adjusted the volume in his mask and breathed it deeply.

The recycled methane was nothing compared to the pure Methane of the tent, but all grunts had become use to the nature of the breathing apparatus. The other grunt gave Palab a grumble and he returned the gesture in thanks. The grunt then walked off, leaving Palab to finish prepping his armor on his own. Palab stepped into the air lock and quickly adjusted his face mask. A small amount of oxygen slipped into his mask and for a second Palab gagged. He held his breath for a few seconds, and adjusted his mask. Palab exhaled and took a breath. Everything was fine.

"You ready." Another grunt stated, shocking Palab.

Palab jumped from the sudden words, "I no see you." He looked at the grunt and recognized him as the one that approached him earlier and summoned him to see Yammaeda. "Me ready." Palab pressed the button to the airlock and the outer door opened. The sunlight struck their eyes and they ventured out toward the center of camp.

- - - - -

Doz Yammaeda was worried. He paced back and forth across the room and occasionally looked out the window at the camp several feet below. The tower was an excellent command locale, and provided an excellent view of the ruins. If battle began, the tower would be the worst position to be in, but that was the least of his concerns. He looked at the communication from the Spec Ops Commander and began to read:

"\_The brutes have taken the passage to the control room. They have the index and the Oracle. Things are not looking good but as luck would have it the Arbiter is aliveâ€¦|\_

"\_We have engaged the Brutes and the Arbiter has made it into the control room. We will assist him as soon as we dispose of the Brutes guarding the exterior. I have sent several warriors to aid the Arbiter and some of them were once Honor Guards; skilled with the blade and beam. Many councilors have also gone to his aid. It is only a matter of time before we end the Brutes control of this areaâ€¦|.."\_

But that was the last transmission from the front line. Yammaeda wanted to join his brothers in combat, but he was left behind; left behind to watch over a base filled with grunts. He wanted to contact the Commander, to see if the battle was going well, but he knew that contacting him would lead the brutes directly to the base if they were monitoring communications. But what concerned him mostly was the last transmission he intercepted from Tartarus:

"\_Brethern it is timeâ€¦| Purge the unworthy elites. We have entered the Control Room of the sacred ring and in moments everything shall be made right. The elites have a base somewhere on the Sacred Ring,

find it, and strike deep into their unworthy hides! Let the last thing they see be the awesome strength of my Tribe. Come, human, it is easy. Take the icon in your handsâ€¦|"\_

The transmission stopped immediately. It was being broadcasted on every frequency across the Covenant band, Tartarus wanted everyone to hear it, but it was suddenly terminated. Perhaps the Arbiter and his forces had arrived, or maybe the weak human had done something. Still, it was of no concern to Yammaeda, the great journey was about to begin and not by the hands of the Elites. The Brutes were now the favorites and that meant that only the Brutes and Prophets would be permitted to go. But why did Tartarus have a human with him? Such thoughts wouldn't matter if the sacred ring was activated, so Yammaeda brushed the thought aside. He had to be concerned with the more pressing matter; the Brutes knew of the base and they were coming.

Below Yammaeda, four grunts in shades protected the tower from rouge attacks. Palab and his escort crossed the small stone pathway near the tower door as two of the grunts, mounted in the stationary plasma turrets, watched closely.

The Special Operations division of elites had never met defeat, and not until the human war had they met a foe worthy of targeting. The human Demon had changed everything within the Spec Ops code of conduct. The Demon alone had made fighting the humans worthy, and every elite throughout the fleet eagerly attempted the "trials" in order to join the ranks of Special Operations; only so that they could test their might against the human's finest warrior. The Demon was partially the blame for the Civil War.

Palab and his escort finally reached the top of the tower and Palab felt a strong urge to take a nap, but fought the natural tendency and entered the room. Yammaeda had not noticed him until he knocked on the wall of the room.

Yammaeda looked up from his moment of thought, "Palab. We have much to plan for. Escort, return to your duties."

"Yes sir." The escort replied. He then looked to Palab and garbled something in there own language, fully aware the Yammaeda had not taken the time to learn grunt speak. Palab looked curiously at his brethren and pondered what he had just said to him. Palab gave a simple head bob and the grunt waddled back down the stairs.

"What did he say?" Yammaeda asked.

Palab hesitated and replied, "â€¦| he say 'good day'." A clear lie and Yammaeda knew it, but didn't care, there were other pressing matters at hand.

"The brutes throughout this region of the fleet are looking for this base." Yammaeda stated sharply. "And this presents a problem. Until the Commander returns with more warriors for our cause, we are severally out numbered and out powered. The four hunters within our ranks will serve us well, but not even they can withstand the might of a full platoon of brutes."

"You have plan?" Palab questioned.



"The commander left clear instructions that all Spec Ops squads throughout the fleet were to rally to this position in the event that the Prophets betray us. He will broadcast the location to trusted ships once he deems the situation necessary for thatâ€¦ however." Yammaeda paused. He thought about the last transmission from the major and how it had been hours since his last check in. But then he quickly remember Tartarus' last broadcast ten minutes ago, he had no time. "â€¦ however I fear the worst. If my brothers have fallen to the hand of the Brutes, then no one will know of this bases' location."

"You call fleet ship masters." Palab suggested. "Give them rally point location here."

"Me?" Yammaeda chuckled at the thought of contacting the fleet ship masters and notifying them of the location. He would be strung up by his mandibles for breaking rank in such a way. "That won't be possible. The spec ops squads know the code of conduct in battle. 'Follow the chain of command.' They would ignore my broadcast completely. Plus, I'm quite certain the Brutes will be listening. It would only take them a few moments to unscramble the frequency and learn of our location. No, for me to contact the ship masters would be pointless." Yammaeda walked toward the window and glared toward the dark region of Delta Halo. The ring was drifting into the shadow of its orbit around the blue world. "I have a mission for you."

"Mission?" Palab questioned.

"I'm putting you in charge of a squad of Spec Ops grunts. Form your team and â€¦" Yammaeda was interrupted as the tower slowly began to rumble. Yammaeda then realized that it wasn't the tower, but the entire region was shaking. He gripped the communication's terminal and glared out the window as the horizon near the contrl room began to glow. "By the gods, this is it." There was a massive flash of light from the distance, pulsed into the air. The ball of white-blue energy glowed majestically as it flew up into Halo's atmosphere and then into space. It seemed as if the entire ring world no longer had life as a silhouetted darkness crossed the world. The energy used to fire the weapon had drained all of the energy from the ring, and any form of lighting dimmed; including the lighting within the tower. The ball of energy flared into space toward the center of delta halo's axis. The center of the ring pulsed with another form of energy, but it faded as if there was some form of failure. All eyes watched as the pulse of energy met with the exact center of halo's rotation and dispersed.

The power drain ceased and the lights began to power on.

"What happen?" Palab questioned. "This not Great Journey, is it?"

"Noâ€¦ thankfully." Yammaeda replied, but he wasn't really sure himself. "I would imagine the great journey being slightly different. I believe something else has transpired. Perhaps our brothers are not done fighting yet." Yammaeda had a renewed sense of purpose and exhaled. If his brothers were still fighting then so would he. "Perhaps the great journey was prevented. No matter, we have our own lives to contend with now. Form your team and begin patrolling the western region of the camp. You will alternate your location every

hour, moving west, north, east, south and so fourth. Continue until you've circled the camp. It is a basic parameter patrol and be sure to take plenty of supplies, you may be out there for a while. Any questions?"

"We take spare Ghosts?" Palab asked. "Cover more ground faster."

"Very well." Yammaeda agreed. "Notify me on the transmitter if you see or engage any hostiles; including humans or the parasites. But be cautious and use short range frequencies only."

"Yes sir. Me go now. Prep supplies and team." Palab hustled out of the room and down the stairs. He was greeted by the escort as he snored loudly at the door. "Wake up! We have mission!"

- - - - -

Palab assembled a squad of twelve grunts, and they gathered at an old stone structure near the central tower. The structure was partially covered by overgrown vegetation and the numerous underground rooms provide adequate storage holds for vehicles and supplies. Inside the ruin were dozens of ghosts, three wraith tanks and a handful of specters. Etah and his grunt supply teams eagerly assisted Palab in prepping six ghosts for his patrol. And Etah himself would be on the team.

"Why not all get ghosts?" Etah asked.

"If base attacked, other ghosts needed here." Palab stated. "Two per ghost. Etah, you lead second section. I lead first. You follow behind out of view, in case me section miss something." Palab then looked over their weapon arsenal and thought carefully of any future encounters. "We face brutes, they be in packs. Need many grenades." The grunts all gargled happily at those words. They all loved the blue-sparkle-of-death. "We need to travel light; fast. One Fuel Rod gunner in each section. Enemy not worry about us cause we grunts. We fool them." Palab picked two grunts, one from each section, and handed them a Fuel Rod cannon. "You ride in center of sections. You only fire when enemy in clear sight. You in center, you can fire in front and behind." The grunts all chattered amongst themselves about Palab's plan. Palab was smart, and they all knew it. Usually it was only the elites that would devise such detailed strategies.

Palab thought more about the enemies they would most certainly encounter while on patrol, "We also fight stupid jackals and drones. We not worry. They cowards. Jackal hide behind shield and run at us, they not smart like us, use grenades and stupid jackals die good. Drones not fight from sky long, they get tired, then land. If drones come, we take cover. When they land, we attack. Flood will be problem. If see one flood, there will be more. Use grenade and needler on flood."

Etah was taken back by his pack brother's plan. He had taken everything into account; even the drones inability to fly for a long time. Despite his brother's feelings of wanting to not be special, it was obvious to all the grunts that Palab was not ordinary. Etah was amazed at how much his younger brother had changed in the past several hours. He thought that perhaps the battle against the flood earlier that day was luck. The nearby Quarantine Zone, where the

sentinels battled aggressively against the flood, had one break in its wall; the door where Palab and his pack made their fame. It had taken Etah all day to realize that the building collapsing on itself actually stopped the flood from entering the region from that route. Had Palab known this and purposefully destroyed the building? In some ways Etah wished he was there fighting with Palab, to see how he handled the battle, but this time he would see Palab with his own eyes. He had to see why the elites respected his little brother.

Palab jumped into the pilot seat of a ghost and another grunt jumped on the side. The pedals adjusted to its shortest position, but the little grunt still couldn't reach the foot pedals, but it was fine, the grunts had long learned to compensate their driving style without the use of the ghost's peddles. Etah quickly walked up to the side of the ghost and looked at Palab, as the ghost's vertical thrusters raised it above the ground.

"Palab, you know that flood stop coming when building fall?" Etah questioned.

"Me knew." Palab replied. "Me not know that building would fall, but me knew that flood would stop coming. Hurry, Etah. We need to start patrol now."

"Yes sir." Etah waddled to lead his section as Palab and his three ghost units sped out of the building and accelerated westward; out of camp.

"Etah hurry!" Etah's rider yelled as he watched Palab's section vanish out of view. The grunt jumped onto the side of a ghost.

"Im coming!" Etah replied. He jumped into his ghost, and quickly began to follow the path behind his younger brother as the area was engulfed in darkness; Halo had finally entered the dark side of its orbit behind the massive world. Etah, with two ghosts following behind him, thought hard about what it could mean for a grunt to achieve so much as Palab had in the past day. "Messiah." Etah thought to himself. The possibility was unfounded and just a legend, but what if it were true. Could it be that his younger pack brother might be the Grunt of legend? "The mighty grunt that will lead us home."

## 5. The Dirty Dozen

\*\*\*"The Dirty Dozen"\*\*\*

"Yammaeda, do you copy?" The Spec Ops commander roared into his wraith's communications system. "The brutes in the canyon have been defeated, and the Arbiter was successful in stopping Tartarus, a lot has happened here. Expect another update after I have spoken with the Arbiter. Phantoms of elite and hunter support should be arriving to the control room shortlyâ€¦ copy?" He gazed at the com and waited for a reply, but after nearly a minute of nothing the commander began to worry.

"Commander?" The Arbiter questioned from outside the wraith. His voice echoed within the wraith and the commander raised his head.

"Arbiter, something's wrong at the base." The commander noticed that the Arbiter was no longer alone. At his side stood several members of the High Council, the ones that had survived Tartarus' hammer, and two humans standing behind them. His face grimaced with the intent to kill the humans, "Humans? Can we trust them?"

The Arbiter turned and looked at Commander Keyes and Sergeant Johnson, "Trust is a word that can not be used too lightly, at least not so early in our alliance. But we have nothing to fear from them. Without weapons, these humans are harmless."

The Commander huffed, "Very well, but we should watch them closely. As you recall, the Demon has a tendency to arrive whenever his kind are captive. But to the matter at hand, I haven't been able to reach the base for some time. I left the sergeant with only a regiment of grunts. If they were attacked by any brute patrolsâ€¦"

"â€¦ then perhaps we should go there." The human female, Miranda Keyes, interrupted. "Forgive me for intruding, but if you have a base of operations here on Delta Halo, then we should get there and begin working on a plan to stop Truth." Miranda had her own plans in mind, but for now she needed the elites. Sergeant Johnson was already attempting to establish a position with the elites; attempting to earn their respect by not backing down from one of the elite High Council members that was not speaking to him. Miranda knew that her platoon of Marines and ODST's were scattered throughout the region of Delta Halo known as the Quarantine Zone; at least those that had survived. If she could gain the trust of the elites then she could start searching for them and the Chief, and then find a way to stop Truth from reaching the Ark.

"If you would let me finish, humanâ€¦" The commander interjected. "They were to go to silent communications if they were attacked, meaning that the base is no longer an option. They will need to stand their own grounds without us. Going there could put the Arbiter and the council members in unneeded danger." A nearby phantom descended into the area and the commander looked to the Arbiter. "We will need to find another vantage point to gather followers and supplies."

"For the Council's sake, I understand." The Arbiter added. "But it would be wise to send a scout team to investigate the base and verify its fall."

"Already ahead of you Arbiter." The commander was already on his com contacting one of the numerous phantoms he had just dispatched to his location. "Team twelve responds."

From the other end of the communication came a rough Elites voice, "This is team twelve, commander. The battle above still rages and High Charity is completely overrun with the Parasites. We are now in route to your location."

The commander and the Arbiter both clinched their fists in anger at the words. Their home, High Charity, was overrun by the flood infection. "Is there no end to their chaos?" The commander stormed.

The Arbiter placed a hand on the commander's shoulder and gave him a quick nod. He understood the gesture; they couldn't dwell on any one

situation for too long. The commander felt somewhat pleased that the Arbiter held no ill toward him, despite their mixed history together. The commander knew who the Arbiter really was, and how the prophets had ripped him of his command status and disgraced him publicly. Even when they were reunited in the hunt for the Heretic leader, the commander had not shown him any leniency. The commander had thought the prophets were right, and that the one time Supreme Commander of the fleet of Particular Justice was indeed incompetent, but his skill at killing the Heretic leader was unmatched. Fighting by the Arbiter's side had made him regret ever doubting his one time leader.

"Team twelve, the base may be in jeopardy, I need you to brake off from the Task Force and investigate the situation."

"Yes Sir." The Elite stated from the com, and then disconnected. The fall of High Charity, all of their brothers, their home, was a daunting blow. It was a blow that the Commander could not help prevent.

Outside the Wraith, Miranda overheard everything and turned her attention to the Arbiter. "What do we do know? With every minute we wait, Truth grows closer to the Ark. And if your base has been compromised, our ability to amass a suitable attack force is limited. Perhaps if we can locate the Master Chiefâ€¦"

"The Master Chiefâ€¦ the Demon, is no longer on the Sacred Ring." The Arbiter added.

"You've seen him?" The other human, Avery Johnson, questioned. His interest was peeked at the discussion and he finally backed down from the elite councilor. Johnson walked closer and adjusted his hat as he came near. But Johnson wasn't the only one that was interested in knowing the fate of the Demon. The council members also came closer to the wraith and paid close attention to the Arbiter's words.

The Arbiter addressed the group. "I did encounter the Demon, and something else. We will discuss it later, but for now our main priority at this point is stopping Truth. We need a ship and support before we can do anything critical. Therefore we mustâ€¦"

"I have scanned the nearby data terminals for this Installation." 343 Guilty Spark suddenly interrupted as he descended from the Control Room. Floating majestically under his own power, the monitor stopped between Johnson and Keyes; sensing that it would be best to stay close to the Reclaimers.

"The light bulb returns." Johnson sighed.

"Oracle?" The Arbiter questioned toward 343.

"You insist on calling me by such an unusual title." 343 muttered as he turned to face Johnson and Keyes. "Reclaimers, the flood outbreak upon this Installation is in direct result of this stations missing Monitor, 2401 Penitent Tangent. The Sentinels' programming has not been updated in nearly seven hundred of your years. By my estimations, the monitor has been missing for approximately seven hundred and seventy seven years, and the fighting has been ongoing for more then one hundred thousand years. It was only recently that the Quarantine Zone failed to contain them. The flood was unable to

escape, even though they have been free for quite some time, they were unable to spread throughout the ring. Even without the monitor, this Installation's defenses have been active and fighting the flood. Meaning that the flood have been awake and active since the beginning."

"The beginning?" The Arbiter questioned.

Guilty Spark turned and faced the Arbiter. "Yes. The beginning of the Flood Wars."

- - - - -

A train of three ghosts sped through a path of hills and trees. Palab, and his first team of six grunts, had been surveying the area for less than ten minutes when they approached a massive clearing. Luckily, Delta Halo was no longer in the shadow of the massive blue world, and the sunlight quickly engulfed the area. What they saw ahead of them placed most of Palab's section into immediate shock. Fourteen Phantoms were headed directly toward base camp. They were flying close to the ground; no more than twenty feet from the surface. The Brutes were coming. They had a sizeable attack force and were sneaking toward the base, trying to avoid detection.

"What we do?" One of the panicked grunts whimpered.

"We break radio silence, warn base." Palab stated. "Yammaeda, copy?" At the base, Yammaeda heard Palab's call and quickly picked up the com link. He knew that Palab would only break silence if there was immediate trouble.

"Report." Yammaeda stated sharply.

"Enemies to the west." Palab stated. "They come low. Fourteen Phantoms!"

"Get your team back here. I will prepare the defenses." Yammaeda stated.

"Wait!" Palab quickly stated. "They going faster now! Coming fast, very fast!"

"What?" Yammaeda then mumbled to himself, "No! They have already cracked the scrambled frequency. They have been listening in to Palab's every word."

"We're coming, but enemy beat us there." Palab stated as his section turned and began to race back to base.

Yammaeda disconnected the com and began to dash out of the room when the com suddenly popped on again.

"\_Yammaeda, do you copy? The brutes in the canyon have been defeated, and the Arbiter was successful in stopping Tartarus, a lot has happened here. Expect another update after I have spoken with the Arbiter. Phantoms of Elite and Hunter support should be arriving to the control room shortlyâ€¦| copy?" \_

Yammaeda reached for the com link, but paused inches before activating the response signal. He couldn't reply. The Commander told

him to not make contact if the base was under attack. Yammaeda felt a sense of rejoice when he heard the Commander's voice, and hearing that they were successful was an added bonus. But now it was his turn to push back the brutes. His chances were slim, but he would fight them to the end. The commander would avoid the base at all cost now, leaving the survival of everyone in Yammaeda's experienced hands.

Yammaeda dashed out the door and down the stairs. As he passed the exit to the tower he slammed his fist against the alarm and the base become active with whistles. The four hunters sprung from their resting places and raced to the tower. Grunts poured from every ruin within the camp, scurrying across the ground as quickly as their stubby legs could carry them. The grunts littered the area around the tower and for the first time Yammaeda could see that his force was much larger then he first thought; despite it being made up of grunts.

"The Brutes are attacking from the west. Man stationary guns and fuel rod cannons." Yammaeda yelled to the army of grunts. His force was massive, but they were only Grunts, they wouldn't last long if the brutes made it into camp.

"Where Palab?" One of the Grunts questioned. Suddenly all the grunts were eager to know the location of the famed grunt leader.

"He was out on patrol, but he is on his way." Yammaeda firmly sated. "Quickly, to your positions, there is no time to waste." The grunts all scampered off nervously as the Yammaeda dashed through their numberes. The Four hunters quickly joined Yammaeda's side and followed him to the vehicle bunker. Inside the bunker, Yammaeda ran up to four grunts as they shivered near the three wraiths.

"I hope you have all practiced well." Yammaeda stated to the nervous grunts. "Let's go." The four grunts split up into two pairs and went to their respected wraith. They then powered up the wraiths, and the massive vehicles began to slowly head out into the open. "Not bad." Yammaeda commented. "Now I only hope they know how to aim." Yammaeda climbed into the reaming wraith and looked toward the hunters. "You have your orders. Fire from cover until the Brutes charge into camp, than release your rage upon them and make them regret ever harming your Hunter kin." The two hunter pairs roared and began running out of the ruins; following behind Yammaeda's tank. Two of the hunters then broke off from following the tanks and headed to the western region of the base. Their massive armor clanged loaded as they swiftly raced across the ruin's open clearing in the center of the camp, where a small group of grunts lay hidden with plasma cannons and fuel rods. There they stopped and waited for the Phantoms to breach the hills.

The entire camp was quite. The bustle and activity from before was reduced to only 2 visible hunters standing in a field and gazing toward the western hills. Within moments three phantoms roared over the hill.

"The first wave." Yammaeda thought to himself from his hidden position. "They aren't aware of our abilities, but knew that we would be waiting for them. Not bad, for a bunch of dumb brutes." The hunters fired their massive cannons at the phantoms as they came in range; streaming bursts of radiation that would mortally wound any

other being that tried to wield its size and fire it. Two of the phantoms quickly lost control, broke away from the formation and begin to blindly fire their plasma turrets. The two hunters then focused on the one phantom that hadn't been hit. The combined power of their blast pierced the armor of the phantom and struck its fuel coil toward the rear. A lucky shot. The phantom exploded instantly, in a wave of blue flames. The mass of it crashed into the edge of the camp as small secondary fires erupted from within.

The hunters roared an approval as they turned their attention to the other two Phantoms that had broke formation. They had regained stability and their weapons were bearing down on the two lone hunters. The hunters crouched down, bringing their armor into a full defensive posture and raised their left arm shield. The plasma bursts from the Phantom rained down on them, and they waited for a chance to take a clear shot. With the two hunters pinned down, and unable to fight back, two more Phantoms crossed the hill and began to deploy ground troops. Jackals and brutes by the dozen were quickly massing at the top of the hill.

"They must have overloaded those Phantoms with troops." Yammaeda glared toward the two phantoms as troops descended from its belly. "Those Phantoms should only have a compliment of fourteen! That's why they were flying so low. This changes things." Yammaeda then communicated with the one of the grunt operated tanks. "Go, aim for the hill, they are gathering their troops there."

The first Wraith powered up and sped into view of the hill. A small squad of grunts raced along side of it in ghosts as ground support. The wraith fired a massive ball of plasma which arched across the sky and landed a few yards away from its target, but it was still good enough to kill a handful of jackals.

"Woohoo!" The two grunts inside the tank shouted in joy. "Me do again, this time kill them all." The Wraith fired several continuous volleys at the hill until all that remained was a few charred corpses. However, another phantom began to unload a specter and some ghosts, and they began to speed toward the wraith; pummeling the area in plasma fire.

"Ack!" The driver grunt screamed as his visual screen exploded. The wraith's canopy filled with smoke and the other grunt peered toward the grunt at his side. The driver was dead and the gunner began to panic. He pulled back on the trigger and hoped for the best. The tanks internal power cell was overloading because of the damage and the gunner had no clue of the danger he was in. The wraith tank exploded and the secondary fuel explosion sent a shockwave that destroyed two of the support ghosts at its side.

"Damn it!" Yammaeda cursed as he watched some of the grunts begin to panic. They ran from their cover and eagerly fired their weapons. "Not yet!" he screamed under his voice. But it was too late. Nearly half of his army of grunts had already fled cover and were firing their weapons blindly at the brute piloted specter that had destroyed the tank. The two hunters were still pinned down by the Phantom's fire but managed to get a few shots off; disabling two of the phantom's plasma turrets.

"Maintain discipline!" Yammaeda shouted, but no one could hear his words while he sat in his tank. Then he watched as several specters



raced across the hill and began firing into the line of grunts. One of the Brutes got off a good shot and knocked down one of the hunters. The mighty creature slowly stumbled to his feet and his bond brother quickly stepped to his side to guard him, but left his back exposed. A bright purple flash streaked out of the corner of Yammaeda's eyes and killed the hunter with one shot between the gaps in the back of its armor. The hunter howled angrily as his bond brother crumbled to the ground. He became enraged and charged at a nearby specter, knocking it over and sending the crew crashing to the ground. He then aggressively thrashed his massive shield, slamming several brutes to the ground and dismantling others with the edge. The lifeless bodies fumbled to the ground as the hunter continued to unleash his rage.

A nearby brute witnessed this unyielding assault on his clan brothers and jumped from his ghost. He tossed down his weapon and madly stomped his fist into the dirt. He trampled five grunts in a single step and charged toward the lone hunter. His berserker rage would not be satiated till his hands smashed the target in his eyes. Sprinting on all fours, the brute stampeded across the field, growing even angrier as the hunter continued to slaughter jackals and brutes alike. More grunts were trampled under his feet, their plasma pistols only singeing his hide and adding to his rage. But suddenly the brute felt enormous pressure against his skull. His face was planted into the ground and blackness consumed his eyes. The other hunter pair had sprung from their cover and caught the brute blindsided. Purple blood exploded in the air as one of the hunters stomped the brute's skull into the stone paved ground, and it laughed in satisfaction.

"No need to hold back now." Yammaeda mumbled as he watched the two hunters fire their cannons into the attacking wave of brutes. "All forces advances. Wraith two, aim for the hill, try to keep those troops distracted. Ghost support, be aware, there are snipers to the North West; they're trying to flank us. Fuel rod gunners, aim for the snipers and level the area in plasma." Yammaeda powered his tank and speed out of cover. He heard several pings against his wraith's armor and realized that the snipers were now behind him. "Damn those jackals. They've surrounded us." He turned his tank and began to fire at the trees to the east of the camp. He then saw two phantoms unloading more specters and ghosts, with a full compliment of troops, behind the line of sniping jackals. He was the only one that saw the phantom, as the rest of his regiment focused on the troops approaching from the west.

"If this be my last battle then I die with a blade in my hand." Yammaeda throttled toward the jackals and snipers that were attempting to surround the camp, and fired his mounted guns. He pulled away from the combat zone, and faced the flanking troops alone. He accelerated as fast as he could get the wraith to move and overloaded the main gun. The wraith tank hummed loudly as it struggled to unleash its charging payload, but Yammaeda did not fire the main cannon. The hum grew louder and louder as the forward plasma cannons fired randomly at targets. He then planted a plasma grenade next to the main plasma coil for the gun and jumped from the cockpit. He tumbled to the ground and raised his eyes as the wraith plowed into the area of brutes and jackals, and exploded in a wave of super heated flames. The shockwave knocked him backward but he rolled and sprang to his feet. The two phantoms rumbled backwards from the intensity of the blast and collided into each other. They bounced against each other and spun out of control, crashing into a nearby rock face and rolling to the ground.

Yammaeda gritted at the sight, knowing that it would not have worked had the Phantoms not been so close to the ground. Flipping his plasma sword from his side clip he gave a mighty roar and his battle cry echoed into the wind. His energy sword exploded to life in an intense hiss of power. The blue haze from the elite's weapon created an eerie glow upon his black armor. The two brutes that survived the explosion, stunned and furious, charged toward him.

"Come beasts, I shall show you what a real warrior is capable of!" Yammaeda roared as he charged the two massive brutes. He swung his blade at the first brute, missing him by inches. The second brute grabbed Yammaeda from behind but the flexible elite twisted, freeing himself easily, he then lowered his blade and sliced the brute across his leg. The brute fell backwards gripping the wound and screaming in pain. Yammaeda was tempted to deliver the lethal blow but his instincts kicked in, sensing that the other brute was coming at him. He side stepped the other brute's massive fist and slashed its arms off with the blade. Spinning on his left heel, Yammaeda struck the brute across the throat and continued the swing until he lopped off the head of the brute on the ground. The two brutes gargled and twitched until life had finally drained from their bodies. A lone jackal had witnessed this battle and dropped his weapon; retreating from the area.

The mighty elite, Yammaeda, watched the terrified jackal flee, and then turned and ran back to the battlefield to join his army of grunts. He looked ahead and could see that things were not good. The brutes were leveling the grunts in droves and the three hunters were out numbered. He watched as three brutes ganged up on one of the hunters and smashed his armor in with their claws. Then another hunter fell as it was overwhelmed by several brute shot grenades. Yammaeda knew that he may not be able to make a difference in turning the tide of the battle, but he would most certainly leave his mark.

- - - - -

Six ghosts sped across the countryside toward the battle ahead. Palab couldn't believe how far away they had gone during their patrol, and the dense vegetation on Delta Halo wasn't helping. Explosions could be heard ahead and Palab feared the worst. Smoke began to rise from downed phantoms and stray volleys of plasma soared high into the air. Palab couldn't help but wonder why they were in such a hurry? How could twelve grunts help in a battle where hundreds of grunts were already fighting?

"We change formation." Palab yelled to the other ghosts racing behind him. "Fuel rod gunners to front, we take out vehicles first, then brutes. Etah, you take two ghosts with you, shoot down phantoms."

"What?" Etah shrieked. "How I do that?"

"Brutes attacking base, many grunts die." Palab grumbled. "Brutes not watch Phantoms much longer. They leave phantoms and help fight. You sneak on, steal ship, blow up others." It was a solid plan, yet filled with holes and what ifs, but the time for rational thought was over. Palab had to help his brothers. His team of twelve grunts was racing to the rescue.

- - - - -

Explosions rang throughout the region. Plasma grenade flares dotted the sky as grunts launched them with near expert precision. Brutes screamed as the sizzle from the blue haze warned them of their eminent deaths. But for every brute that was killed ten grunts would fall. Clearly outnumbered by the waves of grunts, the brutes used their power and bulk to smash their way through them; this was not a battle the grunts could win alone.

Yammaeda stabbed another brute and pushed its mass off of him. A nearby grunt aided Yammaeda to his feet and quickly began firing his needler into a nearby Brute. Yammaeda took a deep breath and glared into the wave of brutes, which were smashing and shooting his grunt army without remorse. The mighty spec ops elite was exhausted. He had already killed ten of the beasts, most of which he was forced to stab in the back while they chased or shot at grunts; not his typical battle tactic but affective. Yammaeda looked around to see if any brutes were in the area, gathered his breath and then looked the battlefield over.

Only one hunter remained, his armor was soaked in his own blood, yet he fought on valiantly. The grunts were scattered across the battlefield and some hid in ruins, fearing the inevitable. This was not how he had hoped this battle would fare. He had to pull them together. If he could rally the grunts then perhaps they could make a suitable stand, but getting the grunts to assemble was going to be a daunting task. He then noticed that some grunts were being successful with their ghosts, splattering two or three Brutes at a turn. He adjusted his helmet and raced toward the closest grunt driven ghost. He leapt on the back of the speeding vehicle, startling the grunt.

"Head to the farthest grunt packs that have been separated and rally them at the center tower." Yammaeda yelled over the hum of the ghost's engine. "We make our stand there. Tell the others as you pass them." Yammaeda jumped clear of the ghost and dashed into a crowd of grunts that were holding down an enraged brute. Yammaeda counted ten grunts piled on top of the beast; each clawing and shooting the beast as best they could. Yammaeda jumped into the fray, stabbing the brute through its face with his blade. The grunts jumped off the dead corpse with satisfaction and aggressively looked for their next target.

"Gather at the base of the center tower. The others will join you there." Yammaeda watched the grunts scramble back toward the center tower shooting as they retreated. Despite their cowering nature, grunts in large packs were quite ferocious in battle. The group of ten retreated with textbook detail; two would shoot while eight would flee, and they switched to make sure no one was left behind.

Yammaeda turned and spotted another group of grunts being pinned down in a nearby ruin. He snuck up on the unsuspecting brutes and silently slit one's throat, then stabbed another in the back, covering its mouth so that it wouldn't scream. He looked at the other five brutes, still shooting toward the grunts inside the structure, and verified that they had not noticed him. Activating his camouflage, he then crept up toward them and tossed two plasma grenades he had picked up

from a nearby fallen grunt; sticking them both on the back of two of the brutes. The brutes dropped their weapons and clawed at their backs but soon exploded with a satisfying thump. The other three brutes were now very aware of Yammaeda's presence, and turned to face him. They couldn't see him clearly, but their keen sense of smell made it possible for them to know his location; they had been too busy killing grunts to smell him earlier. Yammaeda charged, slashing one across the stomach and then raised his sword into the beast's chin; splitting its head upwards.

The other two brutes were pulverizing Yammaeda's shields with plasma fire, but he was too swift for them, and ducked behind a nearby pile of rubble. He didn't have much time to let his shields recharge as two grenades landed at his feet. Using his incredible leg strength, he leapt across the rubble and stabbed the first brute as the grenades exploded behind him. The other brute became enraged and tossed its weapon in blind fury. Yammaeda dashed at him, and before the brute could start its rampage it collapsed on top of itself. Yammaeda sliced its torso in half. The brute's hide was tough, but an elite moving at full speed and using all its strength, was apparently tougher.

Yammaeda slid into the ruin and collapsed beside the grunts. Exhaustedly saying; "Gather at the tower with the others, we will make our stand there."

"We help you." One of the grunts stated. "You wounded." Yammaeda hadn't noticed it, but his shields had fallen completely and his side was searing with a plasma burn. Once he noticed the wound, he felt the pain. Gritting his mandibles together, he stood to his feet and readied his blade.

"Go." Yammaeda was stunned that the grunts wanted to help him, but he'd never allow for these unranked grunts to have the pleasure. Despite his trust in Palab, he still knew that the Grunts were beneath him. "I will cover your retreat." The grunts scurried out of the ruins and fled toward the tower. Yammaeda looked over the battlefield again, seeing that the grunts were successfully retreating to the tower, and they were gaining more confidence as they clustered together. When one grunt fell two more took its place. The massive brute shots were a problem, but two grunts on ghosts remained and they quickly cut down any of the brutes with the massive weapons. The battle was still winless, but things were looking up.

Yammaeda stepped from the cover of the ruins and took a deep breath. The Brutes were massing together, preparing for a final push at the grunts that had gathered at the control tower. Yammaeda had to rally them, inspire them with his presence. He ran to the front of the battle line near the control tower. Put his back to the grunts and faced his enemy. The grunts growled in unison at the brutes that stood before them; snapping and aggressively slamming their fists on the ground. They wanted blood, and with their combined numbers, they felt they had a chance to win.

Yammaeda liked the sound; it was a thunderous roar to his ears. The brutes seemed to be taken back by the sound, unsure what to make of it. Yammaeda knew the sound, he had heard it many times in battle whenever the grunts were at his side in a large number, but never had he had this many grunts carry the growl all at once. A slight grin

crossed his face as he stared into the brute's ranks. His army had the brutes outnumbered, outgunned and out motivated. The brutes numbered twenty and the grunt numbers were down to only sixty; plus the two remaining ghosts. They could win this battle. Yammaeda's army and the Brutes were at a stand off, each waiting to see which group would make the next move. But something happened, the grunts stopped growling.

One by one the grunts began to collapse on the ground. Yammaeda looked around but suddenly his arms grew heavy and he couldn't hold his blade. His shields flickered and enormous pain seared into his chest. He fell to his knees and looked to the western hills. Yammaeda cursed at himself for forgetting about them. In the heat of battle he had overlooked their presence and only focused on the brutes. Gathering his grunts together had only made them an easier target, and by standing with them he had doomed himself.

"Damn you... jackal." Yammaeda crumbled forward as the grunts began shooting in all directions. But the jackals were well hidden from their eyes, and picked them apart one by one. Yammaeda wanted to close his eyes, to imagine that he was going to die by the hands of one of the brutes that was now thundering toward his confused army, but that wouldn't be his fate. He was dieing from the sniper shot of a jackal, perhaps even the jackal that he had let run off. Life drained from his body as he rolled his eyes to see the brutes stampeded into his line of grunts. His last breath escaped his lungs and the sound of his grunt army screaming filled his ears. His vision darkened and slowly everything became silent.

- - - - -

Four ghosts climbed the western hill behind the Brutes landing zone. As expected, they had all gone to fight, leaving the phantoms unguarded. Palab and his unit of eight grunts charged over the hill, leaving Etah and his team to deal with the Phantoms. Palab sped down the hill and witnessed the last stand of Doz Yammaeda. Three purple streaks of energy split through Yammaeda's chest. Palab spotted the jackal's encampment as they fired their sniper beams, and silently killed the last of the grunts near the tower even further. Palab lead three ghosts toward the battlefield while one ghost streaked toward the jackals.

The jackals had no idea of what was coming at them. Each of the jackals looked at the green flare, it was so small that they could barely recognize it. But it quickly dawned on them that this was not a good thing. The green flare soon exploded at their feet, sending their screaming bodies into several directions. Two more bombardments soon followed and the jackals had been silenced. The grunt then turned his ghost back toward the battlefield, and his rider reloaded his fuel rod cannon.

Palab, leading three ghosts, sped down the hill, pushing the engines as hard as he could. The other ghosts streaked behind him and the fourth was quickly trying to catch up. Yammaeda was dead and Palab had watched him fall with his own eyes. This meant that he was now in charge, and his grunts were dieing. The brutes were slamming through his grunts easily, and he could tell that his kin were confused and lost without the strength of the elite.

"Faster!" Palab yelled as he throttled the ghost, but it was already

at top speed. He was finally in range and he yelled to his squad, "Fire!"

## 6. Let Slip the Grunts of War

\*\*\*Let Slip the Grunts of War\*\*\*

A lone phantom streaked across the hills and plains of Delta Halo. Inside its hull sat fourteen of the Commanders strongest elites. Team Twelve had just returned from High Charity and were ordered back to base on a scouting run. The leader of this group was Rin Simyaldee, an older elite that had served under the commander for countless years and battles. Second only to the Commander, Simyaldee was a skilled warrior and his specialty was silent combat. He wore the black armor of the Spec Ops, but his armor was striped with a purple bar upon both his shoulders, and also upon his team.

Simyaldee turned in his co-pilot's chair and faced his comrades, as the pilot pointed out their target on the terrain map.

He glared toward his team, "Gear up. Dust off in five units. There is a battle raging in the base, and I have not received word from the commander if we are to engage and support, or return. Therefore, we will engage. These brutes will rue the day they crossed us."

The fourteen elites roared as they smirked and roughly elbowed each other in anticipation. The battle was calling to them, and they would not look away. Each warrior had two modified energy swords; nothing more. This was no ordinary Spec Ops squad, they were the Mirrator; an unseen and deadly group that utilized stealth in battle. The records of their battles have never been recorded and never will be. Their methods are to do whatever is necessary to win, and they crave the blood of whoever their enemies may be.

Many have argued throughout the covenant, that the Mirrator were just a myth. That these super skilled elites were the same elites that protected the Prophets, the Honor Guards, but nothing could be further from the truth. Their leader was the Spec Ops Commander and they were formed by the High Council to serve as the ultimate strike team. Despite their outstanding record on the battlefield, not even the Prophets were allowed to know over their existence. The High Council was well aware that the Prophets had other plans for the Covenant, and after hundreds of years of service to the Prophets the elite High Council decided that it was time to even the odds before the Prophets dealt their hand.

The Mirrator were the right hand of the High Council, being used only when the High Council deemed it necessary. When the Prophets betrayed the Covenant the High Council acted quickly, installing the Mirrator into the front lines of battle. Had it not been for the Commander quick thinking, the High Council would have surely been wiped out, but they successfully protected the elite councilors aboard High Charity and led them to a ship just before the flood arrived. After saving the councilors, Simyaldee and his team were ordered to search High Charity for any stragglers, and to assess the damage caused by the flood. The spec ops commander had no fear of for their safety, he knew that Simyaldee would lead his team with expert precision and ensure the safety of the Mirrator under his leadership. After all, this was not the first time the Mirrator were

called into action to stop the flood, but Simyaldee saw that there was no way to stop the flood from spreading; High Charity was lost.

The fourteen soldiers, Simyaldee, and the Pilot sped toward the battle and stopped near a thicket of trees just southeast of the base. The gravity lift flared to life and fifteen cloaked warriors descended into the tree cover.

Simyaldee dropped to a knee, and with his excellent vision, glanced over the region. "We are clear. Rendezvous in ten minutes. We will secure the Landing Zone." And as quickly as they had arrived, the team vanished.

"Roger, good hunting." The pilot replied. He then turned the Phantom to the west and maintained a low altitude as he slowly crept clear of the area.

- - - - -

Back at the base; Palab and his rider plowed through the line of brutes, catching them off guard, and ran over one of the massive beasts with his ghost. The other three ghosts fared just as well, scoring at least one kill. The brutes were startled by this new wave of attack and regrouped, but Palab used their retreat to his advantage.

"Fire!" Palab screamed to his team, and four green balls of explosive plasma seared towards the brutes as they attempted to gather. They didn't have time to scatter and were quickly consumed by the green explosion. The ghost drivers then fired into the few stragglers that remained. The plasma cannons on the ghosts cut through them quickly and effortlessly. The last brute stumbled backwards as pounds of plasma tore and burned its way across his chest, until he could no longer hold on to life. He rolled backwards as smoke rose from his melted corpse. Palab and his team held their positions, waiting for the brutes to make another move, but none came. It appeared that the grunts had been victorious. The last handful of brutes were easily wiped out by his sudden attack.

Only eighteen of the grunts survived the brute's attack, and they cheered the return of their leader. They all charged toward his ghost, barking excitedly in their native tongue. Palab hopped from the ghost and looked to the fallen body of Yammaeda; the lone elite warrior that fought beside his grunts.

"We did not think that you would return!" A grunt shouted in their native tongue. The older grunt patted Palab on the back happily and snorted as he joyfully gazed into the young Sergeant's eyes.

"I would not leave you all to fight alone, but I did not get here fast enough." Palab stated with a heavy sigh. He felt that if he had arrived sooner he could have helped, but because of his tardiness the only elite that had ever really shown his grunts respect was dead.

Another young grunt approached and spoke in the traditional covenant language, "he fight for us. He help grunts fight." The grunts words didn't ease Palab's feelings, but something was still lingering in the back of Palab's mind. It was almost too easy when he arrived.

Palab crouched to all fours and walked clear of his cheering team and the surviving grunts. Something wasn't right. The other grunts watched as Palab slowly walked to a clearing and picked up a brute Plasma Rifle. He sniffed the air several times and seemed bothered by the stillness of the area. He turned his attention to the eastern hill where smoldering corpses lay, and the hulking metal of destroyed phantoms also burned, but what caught his attention was as simple as a gust of wind. Something was stirring the air near the wreckage and smoke was swirling about in all directions. This wasn't a natural act.

Palab turned quickly and addressed the small group of grunts. "Get weapons, take cover in ruins, they coming." Panic filled the grunts as they scampered about collecting guns and grenades, but Palab stayed focus on the eastern hill. The earlier battle had been to simple and the pieces were starting to fall in place. Palab scrambled to a nearby brute's dead body and quickly examined it. As he suspected, it was only a foot soldier. He quickly scanned more bodies and realized that his hunch was correct; all the bodies within view were foot soldiers.

The brutes were attacking in two waves. They had abandoned the Phantoms and encircled the base on foot. A clean up team was coming and they were usually consistent of the Brutes higher ranking soldiers.

One of Palab's teammates ran up to his side, "Palab, what doing? More bad guys?" The tiny grunt carried his fuel rod cannon and held it at the ready in case anything happened.

"More enemies come. Brutes not done yet, take ghost, get Etah and Phantoms. We need support."

"Yes Sir." He raced back to the ruins and passed off his fuel rod cannon to another grunt. "You take, kill Brutes. Follow Palab's orders and you live long." He then scampered off to a nearby ghost and sped off toward the west.

Once the ghost vanished over the hill things once again became quiet. But a soft rumble grabbed Palab's attention. He turned to his grunts and waved for them to stay down and not to come out. The brutes were coming, and Palab wanted surprise to be on his side; unaware that this was the same strategy Yammaeda had used earlier. But he had a slightly alternate strategy. Palab remained in the open so that he would be the first thing the brutes would see, knowing that they would not fear a lone grunt.

"No more grunts die today." Palab whispered to himself. "I fight, till Phantoms come." Determined to not see his grunts die in a winless battle, Palab stood his ground while the other grunts hid. He was willing to sacrifice himself so that perhaps one more grunt would leave Delta Halo alive. Palab wouldn't wait long as forty Brutes crossed the hill toward the base. In midst of this pack stood a lone specter loaded with four brutes. The driver was highly decorated and signaled for his soldiers to stop. His specter then sped ahead of the group and stopped a few feet ahead of Palab.

With three other brutes mounted on the specter's passenger seats, the driver stepped out and looked the area over, snarling at the sight of his fallen kin. He was massive in size and his fur was patched with



white blotches. Palab was slightly confused at the Brutes appearance. The young brute looked as though he was an offspring of Tartarus, and that meant that he would become the brute's new chieftain if anything happened to Tartarus. Palab didn't know much about the brutes, only that they were mean and ferocious, but this brute peaked his natural curious nature.

The brute snarled, "Tell me grunt. Where are the elites that have slain my kin? The rest of my warriors hunger for their blood." As he had hoped, the brute was clueless to the situation.

Palab slammed his fists to the ground and glared up at the beast. "No elites, brute! Grunts guard base. Not fear you." The Brute lowered his posture quickly and roared in Palab's face, but Palab held his ground and did not cower.

The Brute grew annoyed at Palab's lack of fear, and began to beat his right fist upon his chest. "You do not cower, grunt? Then I will slay you and rip the meat from your bones with my teeth!" The mighty brute slammed his fist toward Palab, but the elusive grunt jumped clear using his arms and legs simultaneously, propelling him several feet away. Palab landed and rolled to his feet.

"Me kill you!" Palab snarled and raised his brute plasma rifle and fired in rapid succession; being cautious to not let the gun overheat. The mighty Brute groaned in pain as the plasma singed his fur, but he brushed aside the pain, broke down on all fours, and charged at the grunt. Determined to trample Palab, the Brute became unconscious of his surrounding and roared with every step he made toward the grunt.

The other grunts peeped from the cover of the ruin and wanted to race out and help their leader, but something strange was happening. Palab showed no fear, nor was he hesitating to fight against the mammoth Brute leader.

"We help, Palab!" A grunt shouted from the front, but one of Palab's teammates stood first and stopped them from going out.

"No. We watch, you see. Palab not lose. He not die. He won't die, not here." The battle raged on; the brute would swing furiously but the tiny grunt dodged with an explosive spring from his powerful arms and legs.

Grunts were slow, elites and brutes were all aware of this, but they were quick in short distances. A grunt had been known to spring itself more than ten feet using their arms and legs, giving them decent agility. Palab was using every trick in the book to create as much distance between himself and the massive muscle of the brute. Palab knew that his only chance was to stay away from the brute's reach, but the Brute was soon growing tired of being humiliated by Palab's explosive quickness, and the plasma shots were beginning to take its toll on him as well. He quickly reached for his shoulder harness and pulled forth his brute shot.

Palab was running out of options, he needed to find another way to fight the massive Brute. The plasma rifle was doing damage but not nearly enough to kill the brute, and that brute shot was going to be a serious problem; one direct hit would be lethal. Palab needed another option, and one would come to him in the form of his trusted

grenade. He placed his hand inside his side satchel and fiddled with a grenade, thinking deeply on what had to do, but a brute shot grenade exploded beside him and he was tossed to the ground. Another explosion pushed him backwards and the pain echoed throughout his body. Luckily, the shots had missed, otherwise Palab would have been killed. The brute watched as Palab slowly rolled to his feet and grew confident at the sight of the wavering grunt; he lowered his gun to gloat.

"For a grunt, you were a worthy opponent. But that ends here." He reloaded his brute shot, took aim and fired several shots in succession, but Palab wasn't about to wait. He tossed the plasma rifle away, fought off the compression of the shockwaves created by the grenade explosions and galloped on all fours. His speed was incredible for a grunt, moving at almost an Elite's jog, but his maneuverability was where he was gaining the upper hand. Palab was able to pivot without hesitation, running in an almost dog like fashion. The brute couldn't get a clear shot off. With every shot, Palab would change direction instantly. Earlier in the fight he was quick when he was jumping away from the brute, but now he was simply fast.

The running felt almost natural to Palab, he had excellent control and speed. It was as if he had forgotten, but suddenly remembered that he could do it. He had grown so accustomed to walking on two legs, and carrying a weapon, that he had never thought of running on all fours. His short stumpy hind legs gave excellent balance to changing direction and he found that he could stride at least four feet per gallop. With his hands free, Palab found that he could gallop faster and further. He dug his front claws into the softer dirt, avoiding the stone pathways, and pulled himself faster. The exhilaration of speed washed over him, and for a moment he forgot about the brute. His arms provided the power to accelerate, and his legs gave him balance and stability. He could turn, hop, and roll fluidly.

The brute emptied his clip and began to reload another, but Palab didn't give him the chance. With a snarl Palab pounced onto the brute's head, grabbed him by the neck and kicked him in the face. There was no longer anyway for him to defeat the brute at a distance, this fight would have to be settled face to face. The brute outweighed Palab by nearly four hundred pounds, but he had to risk it. The brute was unaffected by the kick and grabbed Palab, tossing him to the ground with little effort. He finally reloaded his brute shot but his ears began to buzz with the sound of a familiar hiss.

"No, no, nooo!" The Brute clawed at the back of his head, reaching for the plasma grenade that Palab had jammed onto him. The grenade began to boil into his skin, fusing with the hair and muscle tissue as it began to build the charge that would cause it to explode. Frantic, the brute clawed at his own flesh as he roared in agony. Time seemed to slow but there was no escaping the inevitable. Charred portions of the Brute scattered into every direction. The other brutes watched in amazement. They never thought the chieftain's son could lose and this enraged them. Roars from the berserker brutes channeled throughout the battlefield as they charged down the hill toward Palab.

There was nothing that his group of grunts could do against this charging mass. Defeating one brute was hard enough, but forty would

be too much. There was only twenty six of them left, and Palab wasn't about to let them die before him. He would fight them, he would fight them all. He remembered the specter and instantly turned his attention toward the other three brutes that were with Tartarus' son, but noticed that they were already dead. Upon closer inspection he could see that they're throats had been cut. Palab turned to face the on coming charge of the brutes and weighed his options, but something caught his attention. He could smell an elite nearby.

The deep voice echoed in his ear, "No need to fear. You are not alone." Palab looked up and could vaguely see the silhouette of an elite wearing active camouflage. As the brutes continued to race down the hill toward them, Palab looked to the elite and was curious as to how long he had been there.

"Where you come from?" Palab questioned.

"The commander sent us. I saw your fight. I've never seen a grunt move the way you do. Quite worthy of a grunt that has earned the title of Sergeant." Palab took a quick look toward the stampeding brutes and then back at the cloaked Elite, but he was gone. He had so many questions he wanted to ask how many of them were there, but now was not the time. He had to fight again; to protect his grunts. He heard grass and sand shifting behind him and quickly turned around and noticed that his team had joined him. Where there was once one grunt, now stood seven.

"We with you." One of his teammates stated. "Others stay back for support. We fight."

The seven grunts stood toe-to-toe as the wave of brutes plowed toward them.

Instinct began to consume them and they began to growl.

Their growl became louder and louder as their tone began to sync.

The thunder of the brutes stampede was dwarfed by the grunts combined roar.

The brutes slowed their aggression, as surprise filled them.

The roar of the seven grunts began to vibrate in the brutes ears.

Palab lead their roar, setting the pitch, the harmony and the aggression.

The brutes were mesmerized, shocked and struggling to block the sound.

The brutes stopped their charge and began to shield their ears.

The seven grunts pulled out grenades and followed Palab's earlier show of fighting; they stood on all fours.

The camouflaged elites listened and watched as the nearby Grunts growled. They were also stunned by the tiny creature's display of aggression. The sound was not focused at them, but the results were

the same, they had to shield their ears. Even through their methane masks, the grunts were able to roar in such a way that the pitch was painful to their ears.

The roar stopped and the elites were shocked when they saw the seven grunts step toward the brutes, instead of away. In the sudden silence, Palab released a blood curling cry unlike anything the elites had ever heard and the Grunts sprinted toward the stunned brutes with grenades in hand. The elites were taken back as they watched two, four, and then eight Brutes explode from plasma grenades that were stuck to their bodies. The grunts were rebounding from side to side using their quickness and short height to their advantage. Moving on all fours, similar to Palab's style, the grunts were wrecking havoc on the brute's formation.

A cloaked elite came to Simyaldee's side. "Sir, will we engage?" Simyaldee stood perplexed. He had served many years with grunts at his side, and he had heard their battle cry before, but this was dreadfully different. Simyaldee snapped himself to attention, brushing off the chill he had received from the sound Palab made. His modified energy swords suddenly hissed to life in each hand; each sword bearing only one blade. The twin blades of the Mirrator; a two handed weapon only used by the most skilled of hunters. Designed for speed, not power, they were much lighter than the standard dual bladed energy swords of the elites. The single blade design made for swift strikes against unshielded opponents, and for a Mirrator warrior, all they needed was one strike. Soon more blades appeared from the ghost like shapes of the other elites.

"Spill the blood of our enemies, my brothers! Spare none of these beasts!" Simyaldee sprinted ahead of the cloaked elites at his side and assisted the snarling grunts in battle. Blood suddenly whipped across the air as the blades and explosions crisscrossed in the fray; staining the ground beneath their feet. Invisible warriors began stabbing and slashing into the brutes with the rage of years of built up hatred.

The Brutes never stood a chance.

- - - - -

"Etah, hurry." One of the grunts stated as he lurched over Etah's back. Comically standing on Etah's shoulder.

"Me not fly. Me need to figure out controls." Etah replied with a quick snort.

"Ghost coming!" Another grunt stated from the bottom of the Phantom's gravity lift.

"Friend or enemy?" Etah asked as he yelled down the gravity lift.

"Me not know." The grunt armed his fuel rod cannon and hoped for a sign to shoot. He desperately wanted to kill a brute. But when he spotted the stubby arms of a grunt behind the controls he lowered his cannon. "It friend." The ghost sped toward him and he was forced to jumped clear, snorting in disapproval. "Hey! Not me!"

"Sorry." Came a quick reply. "Where Etah?"

"Inside." The guard stated. The Grunt on the ghost then jumped clear and hurled himself into the gravity lift. Once inside the Phantom he darted to the front, pushed the grunt on Etah's back out of the way, then he himself climbed onto Etah's back.

"Etah, hurry!" He quickly stated, as he pushed and pulled on Etah's armor. "Palab send me! Trouble at base! He need us!"

"You shut up! Me trying! Me need time toâ€¦!" Etah hit a series of buttons and the Phantom's engines roared to life. The three grunts cheered in excitement. "Ok. Man turrets, me fly!" Another grunt jumped up from the weapons hold and passed out several needlers to everyone.

The guard outside the Phantom heard the engines whine to life and screamed, "Wait! No leave me!" The guard jumped into the gravity lift just as it powered down. Etah, and the four grunts with him, climbed into the sky and flew toward the base.

"It fly easy, like banshee." Etah stated as he peeped over the command council. "Stupid engines need commands, me know them now. Shoot other phantoms." The grunts controlling the phantom's plasma turrets quickly turned and began pulverizing the unguarded phantoms parked below. They exploded in unison, one after the other, each smoldering under the grunts constant arsenal.

The gunner all shouted in excitement, "Whooohoo!We go now."

Etah throttled the engines and headed for the base, but the battle there was already over.

- - - - -

Palab exhaled and fell to his chest. He had never been so exhausted. His grunt team checked the dead bodies of the brutes, to make sure that they were dead. They had won their battle, but even if the elites had not joined them, his grunts would have won. The brutes were shocked and thrown so far into confusion that they hadn't realized the grunts were attacking them until after several of them were dead.

Palab was curious about many things. Why was he able to fight the way he had, and why hadn't other grunts learned what he had? Palab was able to outsmart and kill a brute on his own, something that normally took a pack of grunts to do. He struggled to his feet and scanned the area. The other grunts were climbing out of the ruins and running to his aid.

"Palab, you fast." One of Palab's teammates stated as he approached. "We do what you do, but how you do that?"

"Me feel it. It feel natural. Me remember how to do it." Palab sniffed the air and recognized the smell that had suddenly brushed his nose through his methane re-breather. His teammates smelled it as well. The elites were near.

Suddenly four elites appeared beside Palab and his team, and the other grunts stopped in their tracks; a few feet from where the group had gathered. The four Elites encircled the seven grunts and the

grunts that hid in the ruin ran closer, but were cut off by the presence of four more elites that suddenly appeared before them.

"You will all wait here." Simyaldee stated to the approaching grunts. He turned and walked toward the team of grunts that had fought so ferociously with Palab. The three elites at Simyaldee's side watched over group of grunts and prevented them from getting close to Palab and his team.

Palab watched as the spec ops elite walked closer. Even though the group was surrounded by five elites, they showed no fear, and Palab was relieved of this. He had no fear of the elites, and he didn't want his team to be afraid either.

"Sergeant Palab, I am Rin Simyaldee, of team twelve, Special Operations Squad." Simyaldee spoke to Palab with respect and discipline. Palab was shocked and clueless as to how he should respond. "Report on the situation."

Palab stated confidently. "Sir! Yammaeda order me to take team and scout area. Base attacked by Brutes. We come back and kill brutes. Base now secure, but weapons and grunts depleted." Palab responded to the best of his knowledge.

Simyaldee looked the base over, taking a visual a record of all the bodies. "You did your best. The battle has now gone beyond Halo. The Commander and the Arbiter are pulling out. I will contact them and see what our future mission will be. Get the rest of your grunts in order, and salvage what supplies you can." Simyaldee then spotted the dead body of the lone elite that lead the grunt regiment, Doz Yammaeda. He knodded toward two cloaked elites and they appeared into view. They then ran over to Yammaeda fallen form.

Two Phantoms soon crossed the hill and Simyaldee quickly prepped for another battle. The Phantoms descended into the area and one of them lowered its gravity lift. A lone grunt ran out and was quickly intercepted by yet another camouflaged Elite. Palab was shocked that he had not smelled the elite earlier and began to wonder how many other elites were in hiding. Who were these elites?

Palab watched the elite approach the grunt at the base of the gravity lift and quickly spoke up, "Sir. He Etah. He part of team. He capture Phantom."

"Let him pass." Simyaldee stated to the elite that had appeared. The elite nodded and then activated his camouflage; vanishing from sight. Etah scurried to Palab's side and began to report formally, knowing that the elites were watching.

"We miss battle, Sir. Me sorry. But all phantoms destroyed. We keep one." Simyaldee listened in on the conversation and then contacted the pilot of his phantom; floating behind the phantom Etah was piloting.

"Report." Simyaldee mumbled into his com.

The phantom's pilot then replied, "The grunt is correct. I intercepted them after they had destroyed the phantoms. The sky is clear except for the battle overhead."

Simyaldee smirked to himself. "Impressive. Patch me through to the Commander. He will want to know about this." Simyaldee began to walk away from the group of grunts and made sure he was out of ear shot.

Palab happily elbowed his older brother. "Good job, Etah. Separate the grunt squads and begin salvaging supplies and weapons. Load phantoms with as much as we can carry. Leave space for us, we not leave any grunt behind."

"Yes, Sir." Etah scurried over to the on looking grunts and began barking orders and the grunts quickly began gathering materials and loading them on to the phantom. Palab then walked over to his team members and began to give instructions.

"Gather team, and patrol base. No leave anyone behind."

"Yes sir." The grunts stated as they quickly began to go from building to building, including the many methane tents throughout the base.

Simyaldee's com link activated, "Sir, I've reached the commander." The pilot reported.

"Patch me through."

"Simyaldee, I hope you have good news." The commander sighed from the com.

"Sir, nothing much is good news these days." Simyaldee paused and looked around. He watched as the two elites bundled Yammaeda's body into a body bag and then he returned to his report. "This cycle's inductee has fallen. Yammaeda fell in battle."

"That is a tragic loss, and on the eve of his induction into our ranks. The council will need to know of this, as will Balmaeda."

"Had we inducted him sooner, he would have had the gear to fend off this battle. I counted only seventy dead brutes."

"There was nothing we could do, Simyaldee. The loss of Yammaeda will be heavy upon the council. Belmaeda will need time to grieve. Have you spoken to him?"

"No, I was awaiting a better time to tell him. Perhaps after I debrief the others."

The commander sighed heavily over the communicator. "Very good. Our time draws short. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, nearly two dozen of the grunts remain, including Sergeant Palab."

"Indeed. The council warned me to keep my eye on him. But I sense there is more you wish to tell me."

Simyaldee glared over his shoulder at Palab as he spoke into his com. "Yes, old friend. Do you remember our studies of the Grunt

Rebellion?"

"Yes, I do. We found it fascinating that the grunts were able to amass such a force against our ancestors. And their leaderâ€¦ wait, you're not implyingâ€¦"

"I've seen it with my own eyes and heard it with my own ears, commander. It would be wise to inform the Arbiter that another one has been born."

"Another King?" The commander contemplated silently for a moment. "It has been some time since a leader was born within the Grunt lineage. The prophets always eliminated these grunts for fear of him leading the grunts against the Covenant, but perhaps that is also a lie the prophets have passed down to us. What proof do you have?"

"Sergeant Palab killed Tartarus' eldest offspring." Simyaldee stated. "He killed him in one on one battle. And not only that, he killed three more brutes in the following fray. He has also done the call."

A sensation of awe flowed across the commander's mind. "You heard it? Was it as chilling as the documents state?"

"Yes my friend." Simyaldee replied with soft chuckle. "Until this day, I never thought I would never fear a grunt."

There was pause as the commander spoke briefly with the Arbiter on the opposite end of the communication. "The Arbiter and I are doing what is necessary to track down Truth. But the High Council is still in need of protection. They may also have further use of you and yourâ€¦ 'team'. Take the grunts and rendezvous with the High Council. Keep this information about Sergeant Palab secret, but use it to your advantage."

"Good hunting old friend. The next we meet, it will be in celebration of our freedom, and the annihilation of all the cursed traitors."

"Same to you, old friend. For the Honor of the Mirratord."

"For the Honor of the Mirratord." Simyaldee clicked off his com and walked back to the group.

Palab quickly addressed Simyaldee, "Sir, supplies gathered. Both Phantoms ready to go."

"Excellent. Split your grunts into teams, you'll lead one group and I will lead the others. Seven elites per group." Suddenly the remaining camouflaged elites appeared, and Palab was beginning to understand that they were different than most elite squads. There were fifteen of them total, and they each had a purple strip on their shoulders.

"Yes sir, but we have question." Palab stated.

"Of course, Sergeant."

"Who are you?"



Simyaldee looked around, and made sure that only Palab could hear, "We are the Mirratorde; the Right Hand of the elite High Council." Simyaldee pointed to other seven elites. They, in turn, jogged to the second phantom and boarded. Palab watched as his team began to board the same phantom, while the other grunts boarded Simyaldee's Phantom. "The High Council needs us, and the support of all your grunts. Will you lead them on the side of the Council?"

"Mirratorde? You real?" Palab questioned as he thought hard, but knew it was an easy question to answer. But for the second time, the elites were asking for their support. "Grunts fight. Grunts fight so we can go home."

"Then let us depart. There is much to do." Simyaldee sprinted to the lead Phantom and Palab galloped to the second one. He jumped into the gravity lift and looked over the base one last time. As he was hauled up into the Phantom, he pondered the future of the grunts under his command. How many would die to protect the elite's High Council, how many would never live to see their real home? At that moment he decided that he would do everything within his power to lead his grunts to their real home planet. A planet that none of them had ever seen, but always dreamed of.

He landed in the heart of the phantom and looked over the grunts under his command. "We no die here."

## 7. The Knight and Piercing Arrow

\*\*\*The Knight and Piercing Arrow\*\*\*

"Messiah." The word echoed throughout the inner chamber of the Phantom. Speaking in their native tongue of barks and snarls, the word was being whispered back and forth by numerous grunts. Palab knew they were trying to be quiet, but the language of the grunts was not a soft spoken language. Their attempts at whispering were laughable. Palab looked to the elites as they gestured amongst themselves; unconcerned with what the grunts were saying. Palab then turned his attention out of the forward view port as he sat in the co-pilot's chair.

The soft haze and thin atmosphere of Delta Halo vanished as the two Phantoms accelerated out of the ring world's gravity-well. The warm darkness of space appeared everywhere, and soon the battle around High Charity could be seen in total clarity. Ships exploded as forged plasma streaked and arced across space. The Covenant forces were in stronger numbers, perhaps because the Hierarchs had planned for the elites to be outnumbered, but the elites fought valiantly. Palab then began to wonder which ship held the elite High Council.

"You seem nervous." Came an elite's deep voice. Palab was shaken by the pilot's sudden words, and then realized that he had been staring out the forward view portal for quite some time. "What troubles you sir, if you do not mind me asking?"

Palab pondered and then replied, "Brutes and prophets work together. This bad situation. Elite fleet divided, flood on High Charity. Things not good."

"May I speak freely, Sergeant?" The elite questioned humbly,

something Palab had not expected. Palab was still getting used to being treated with respect by the elites, and outranking most of them was something he would have to get use to. Palab looked to the elite and simply nodded his head yes. "For Hundreds of years the covenant has been in dismay. There are things that we, the Mirratord, know that many could never believe. This betrayal by the Prophets was surprising, but the High Council has never fully trusted them. Our faith in the Forerunner's legend is what we have believed in, never the prophets or their Hierarchs. But they have led the Covenant council, and we have respected them. The elite High Council has felt that a change was coming. The Hierarchs changing of the Honor Guards was the signal the elite council was looking for, but for the Prophets to turn on us completelyâ€¦ was unexpected."

Palab was confused at the amount of talking the elite was doing, he had never heard an elite speak so much to a grunt. But the elite filled his curiosity and then some.

"What elite council do now?"

"I am not sure." The elite huffed. "It is the time of the Arbiter, and only he can unite us now." Palab pondered the words of the elite pilot, but once again his curiosity was peeked.

"What your name?" Palab asked.

"Sir, my name is Ladme Balmaeda." Palab had not served much with elites, but he knew that each name had meaning, and he quickly recognized Ladme's familial ties.

"Balmaeda? You know Doz Yammaeda?" He looked to the elite and waited for a reply.

"Yes. He was my first born."

Palab looked away from Balmaeda and fumbled with his words. "He good elite. Fought bravely for us grunts." Out of the corner of his eye he looked to the elite pilot for a response, but none came; at least not to his question.

"Sir, we will be docking with our fleet command ship shortly. You need to contact the Lieutenant so that he can brief you on our docking procedures." Palab could see that Balmaeda didn't want to discuss his son, and he quietly turned in his chair and contacted the lead Phantom.

- - - - -

"That is not what I meant!" The old elite stated. He paced back and forth and his dark red robe trailed behind him. He placed his hands inside his pockets and toyed with a small metal rod; eager to put it to use. He released the energy sword's hilt and looked back to the hologram in the center of the chamber. "If Truth has gone to the Ark, there is little doubt that he is willing to activate Halo." In the hologram stood another aged elite, also dressed in a dark red robe. A massive scar stretched across his brow, a reminder of a battle many years ago.

"What you believe is that Truth will soon start the Great Journey, without us?" The Hologram questioned.

Growing furious, the older elite stomped his hoof and glared at the hologram. "There is no great journey! Did you not hear the Arbiter's words? Did you not see the Oracle at his side? Why is it so hard for you to understand that the Prophets have used us! Halo is a weapon, nothing more!" The elite breathed heavy, taking deep slow breaths to calm himself. "High Elder, it is easy for you to hold on to what you have always hoped was true, but I am here on the front lines. I have seen their treachery first hand and the Oracle's words can not be denied."

"Still, Samyealee, what you speak of is hard for us to accept." The hologram of the High Elder calmly replied. "You are speaking of the collapse of everything we Elites have believed since the formation of the Covenant."

"We are no longer a part of the Covenant." Councilor Samyealee affirmed, finally calming himself. "The Changing of the Honor Guards was only the first step for the Hierarchs."

Councilor Samyealee was the only member of the elite council that had the free time to speak with the other council members back on their home world. He had been talking to them for hours and was growing weary of the conversation. He could understand their shock and unwillingness to believe that the Great Journey was false, but he couldn't bare the idea of the Elite High Council being so blinded.

"My brothers, look at the evidence. First Truth cast down the Elite Honor Guards, and then he instructed the Brute Chieftain to kill the Arbiter. Once the Key was in his possession he turned the Covenant against the elites and all that sided with us; the Grunts and Hunters. Plus nowâ€¦"

"Enough." The hologram sharply stated, tossing up his hands. "You have given us much to think on, councilor. We have much to deliberate upon as it is. What action are you taking now?"

"We are fortifying ourselves and preparing for the brutes next advance. They will try to wipe out the rest of us. But the Arbiter is preparing to go after Truth and the Ark with our fleet, including the Commander and some humans."

"The humans?" The hologram cut in suddenly. "What do we need of them? They are our enemies."

"No, my brother." Samyealee commented with a heavy sigh. "You are still thinking as if we are members of the Covenant. The humans are the enemies of the Prophets. It was them that started this holy crusade to expunge the humans, not us."

"Then why didn't the Arbiter tell us about the humans in his transmission?"

"Because he knew you wouldn't understand. Time was crucial, so he left me with the details to explain to you."

"We will trust in the Arbiter's judgment, but what of the Mirrator?" The elder Elite questioned.

"They are here, with me and the other council members." Samyealee tossed a quick look to the corner of the room, and gazed at the nearby monitor. It showed the location of two Phantom's approaching his ship. "We have decided that it is time to unleash the Right Hand of the High Council upon these Brutes. By the end of this battle, they will know what a true warrior is."

"Utilizing the Mirratord is a rightful act in such a situation. But I ponder if we should reveal them now, or wait our hand for a more desperate time. The Mirratord alone could end this feud if used properly."

The hologram of the High Elder suddenly went quiet as he was clearly speaking with someone off screen.

"The council and I have decided that we must discuss this further. We elites are a proud race, as you know, and telling our brothers of this news will be a chilling blow to our pride and way of life. Do what must be done to protect our brothers in arms. But for now, stay your hand with the Mirratord. Notify the commander that we will await the proper moment to unleash them upon the prophets. We will hold an emergency Council meeting and then contact you when we have convened." The hologram faded and Samyealee was left in darkness, only the silhouette of various terminals gave him any light.

He looked again at the monitor on the opposite side of the room, and saw that the two phantoms from Delta Halo had finally docked. There were still a few minutes before Rin Simyaldee and the Mirratord would need to be debriefed, and Samyealee was grateful for the moment alone. He felt a sudden swell of emotions overtake him. The elder warrior fell to his knees and sobbed heavily in silence.

His life was sworn to the upkeep of the covenant, and to seek out all knowledge of their gods. He was a warrior that had seen the destruction of many species, and for that past ten years he had served upon the Elite High Council with honor. It was such a glorious honor to be granted a station upon the front lines, and to monitor the events of the Human Covenant war, but everything he had known was false. He knew very well how the rest of the council back home felt, and it was a pain in his heart like nothing he had ever felt in battle.

Samyealee gathered himself, dried his eyes in the collar of his robe and stood to his feet. If this was the fate of his kind then he would face it like all elites under him would; in battle. He walked across the room and approached his closet; removing a silver belt. The belt was beautifully designed with gold and red lines. He wrapped the belt around his waist and tightened it firmly. He then pulled the small metal rod from his pocket and fastened it to his belt. With a soft flip, he pulled his hood over his head and walked toward his chamber door. His face vanished beneath his hoods ominous cloak, and he fastened the robe together.

A warrior of the elite council was never seen in battle against the humans, merely because they were not permitted to battle. They had seen years of conflict and had earned the right to oversee all of the elite affairs, but the time had come for that to change. Samyealee was aged, but if battle would come his way, then brute blood would stain his hands.

Shrouded in mystery and donning the belt of the High Council, Samyealee stepped into the light of the corridor and was instantly greeted by two young and strong elites; both donning the purple bar of the Mirratorid.

"Elder." The two elites stated softly with a bow.

"To landing Deck six." Samyealee stated from beneath his shroud.  
"Your brothers have returned."

- - - - -

The Knight and Piercing Arrow sat patiently at the center of the elite's battle group. It was the command ship and home of five of the nine High Council members within the fleet. Stretching twice the length of any standard carrier, the Knight and Piercing Arrow had well over nineteen decks, a crew compliment of more than two thousand and equal to any of the Prophet's vessels.

All around the battle waged on as soft plums of red and yellow dotting the orbit of High Charity. The brutes were putting up a decent fight but the elites were not going to be pushovers. The prophets had clearly orchestrated a battle that would favor the brutes, their ships outnumbered the elites three-to-one, but the brute's strategic abilities lacked severally in combat.

The landing deck of the Knight and Piercing Arrow was bustling with activity as damaged seraph fighters smoked into the bay. Rescued soldiers from life pods littered the area as medical teams assisted them as best they could. Grunts loaded cargo pods into Phantoms and directed refugee phantoms into various terminals, but once Samyealee walked onto Landing Deck Six, it was as if time stopped. Every elite bowed their heads, wounded or not, and grunts remained silent. There was no elite more worthy of this form of greeting than those who earned the right to sit upon the Elite High Council. These elder warriors were not only legends of the battle field, but they were also wise and the most trusted to uphold the pride of the elite race. After acknowledging the Council member's presence everything returned to normal and the landing deck quickly began to buzz with life again.

Samyealee and his two guards walked toward the two Phantoms and waited as Rin Simyaldee descended from its belly.

"Welcome back, Second." Samyealee stated as Simyaldee bowed respectfully. "The Commander briefed me on the events on the sacredâ€¦" He paused as he realized it was time to stop calling things by the name given to them by the Prophets. "I meanâ€¦ Halo."

Simyaldee stood and acknowledged the councilman, "Good. I am glad that he was able to make contact with you. We lost a lot of grunts and with High Charity fallen to the Parasite, it may be time to take drastic action."

"If you mean destroying High Charity, then you and the Commander have been friends for far too long." Samyealee stated with a soft chuckle. It felt good to laugh, he thought, seeing that there wasn't much to laugh about. "He and the Arbiter have already decided on that, and our battle group will be relocating to another sector. They are

leading a strike team on board and will destroy it from the inside. It is as if you two can read each others minds. Hopefully we will be able to take out a few of those brute controlled ships in the explosion. The Ring world will hopefully be destroyed as well."

"In order to fool the Brutes we will have to hold our Slip Space jump until the moment High Charity explodes. Is Captain Timnaldee ready for such a tricky maneuver? "

"He is ready." Samyealee quickly stated with a firm nod. He watched as the gravity lift lowered from the second Phantom and a team of grunts landed on the deck, followed by the other members of the Mirratord. He quickly spotted Palab and began to walk toward him, Lieutenant Simyaldee followed closely, as did the two guards. "Dispite the Captain's youth, he did serve in the Supreme Commander's \_Fleet of Particular Justice\_ at the human's last stronghold world. He knows this ship better then I, and I am quite confident in his ability to command."

"If you say so, elder." Simyaldee replied confidently. The two turned their attention to Palab as he directed his team and the elites, and began assisting in clearing the landing deck for more incoming and damaged fighters. Simyaldee was still getting used to seeing a Grunt take command so easily, but he looked to the elder council member and noticed that he saw a smile on the old warriors face.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Samyealee questioned. "I was a young and foolish warrior when I fought during the Grunt Rebellion, and not since then have I seen a grunt with the ability to lead as Palab can. Back during the rebellion, their King fell at the hands of the Arbiter in single combat. None of us saw the fight, but for a grunt to fight an elite and mortally wound him before falling, is something worthy of legend. Imagine another grunt with this ability, but this time working with us."

"Elder." Simyaldee interrupted. "We have much to prepare. We should go to the bridge immediately. I will leave Palab in charge, he seems to have everything under control." Simyaldee waved toward Etah and the tiny grunt hustled over to his side.

"Yes?" Etah questioned.

"Go to Sergeant Palab and tell him that he is in charge of maintaining the docking procedures from here on out." Etah hesitated, but quickly ran toward Palab.

Samyealee folded his arms and begin to walk to the exit. "Captain Timnaldae may not be happy with your decision, but he will not complain so long as I agree with your actions. Either way, once our battle plans are set, we will gather all officers and debrief them on the Arbiter's plan."

Palab continued barking orders to his grunt brothers and speaking to the elites in his best Covenant speak, but something was puzzling the young grunt. So much had happened in the past few hours, and now Simyaldee and the Elder were leaving the landing deck. He then saw Etah shuffling toward him barking in their language.

"Sergeant Palab, sir! The elite left you in command of all docking procedures. The Elder elite seemed to agree."

Palab frowned, "What? But that's the dock masters job. The dock master will not be happy with this. Etah, continue to direct the others. I want these landing zones clear of these supplies so that we can get as many survivors in here as possible." Palab looked to a nearby pack of grunts that were wounded and resting. "I'll be back soon brother, after I speak with the dock master."

"Good luck Palab." Etah snarled as he ran over to more elites and grunts and began to take over for Palab.

"Hey you guys." Palab barked to a nearby group of wounded grunts. "No time for resting, I have something for you to do." The grunts weren't listening and simply grumbled at Palab's words. Apparently news of his title and rank had yet to be spread around the ship. He was somewhat relieved that these grunts saw him as normal, but there was much more at state then his own apprehension.

"My name is Sergeant Palab! Get to your feet!" Palab barked with a fury that startled every grunt on the Landing Deck; even Etah was caught of guard in the distance. The four grunts were startled and confused, but there was something in Palab's voice that demanded they obey him. "Gather turrets and position them at every exit in and out of the landing deck. We have dozens of ships outside waiting to come in, and we don't have time to ID each. If the brutes find a way aboard, then I want this deck secured. Move out!"

The grunts didn't hesitate and scampered about gathering turrets and spare plasma cells. They then split up and ran toward the four main doorways into the landing Deck. Palab looked up toward the other three decks of \_the Knight and Piercing Arrow's\_ landing bay, and begin to think of other defensive position for turret gunners, but that would have to wait for now. He had to debrief the Dock Master at once. Palab turned and bumped into an elite that was standing behind him. Palab was a little upset that he hadn't smelled the elite coming, but the room was so saturated with the smell of elite blood that it was hard to tell how close any of them were.

The elite stood motionless and barely looked down at Palab. The towering elite warrior rested his hands on his hips and frowned sternly at the lowly grunt before him.

"Care to explain why you are telling my grunts what to do?" The elite snarled, clearly ignoring the fact that Palab was wearing the black armor of the Special Operations team.

Reverting back to covenant speak, Palab questioned. "You Dock Master?"

"Yes I am, grunt! And I want to know what you told those grunts to do! This is my dock!" The dock master snarled and hovered over Palab in an attempt to make him cower. Palab held his ground and actually glared back at the elite.

"Me Sergeant Palab. Me now control Landing Deck. You help me bring in ships and secure docks in case brutes board ship." Palab stated as clearly as he could.

"A Sergeant? Which of my brothers gave you that title?" The elite was slightly annoyed that the grunt was telling him what to do, but even

more annoyed that a grunt had him out ranked. Another elite approached their discussion and Palab quickly recognized him. It was Balmaeda, the pilot of Palab's Phantom and Doz Yammaeda's father.

"Who gave him his rank, is none of yourâ€¦" Balmaeda was outraged that the Dock Master was questioning a Spec Ops grunt, let alone a sergeant, but Palab raised his hand to silence Balmaeda. The little grunt didn't want to be helped.

"Who give me title, not your concern!" Palab growled as he glared upward at the Dock Master's eyes. "Me now in charge, you obey, or get off Landing Deck. Me have job to do!" The Dock master was stunned. Palab wouldn't back down, showed no fear, and actually threatened him. He was silent for the better part of a minute, dumbfounded.

Spec Ops grunts were seen as seniors in the grunt ranks. They were specialized grunts that had trained tirelessly with elites, knew the regimen of protocol and were tough. But a grunt was still a grunt, and though their black armor made them higher ranking then Dock Master's, they still had no place in ordering an elite. But a Sergeant in the grunt ranks; that was another matter.

"Yesâ€¦ Sergeant." The Dock Master huffed through gritted teeth. "What are your orders?"

Palab didn't lower his aggression, nor did he relax. He knew that this was going to be the way all elites outside of the Mirratord would see him; as only a grunt. His rank meant nothing to them because they did not serve with him on Delta Halo, had not seen him fight, and didn't know of his abilities as a leader. He would have to prove himself on the ship before any of the other elites would give him any recognition. The elites respected actions and the ability to fight, and it would be hard for them to respect a grunt a face value.

Palab gestured toward the grunts and elites that rested on the side of the Landing Deck. "Get wounded elites and grunts that not badly injured. Set up defenses on upper decks of dock and hallways leading toward command decks and engineering."

"Sergeant Palab, Sir." Balmaeda interrupted. "Do you think we will be bordered?" The Dock Master was astonished at how much respect Balmaeda was giving to the grunt and then began to understand that there was more to this grunt then he had first thought.

"Me not sure, but me think so. Brutes know this command ship, kill high council members and elites slowly loose chain of command. We not take chances. Balmaeda, you help Dock Master. Keep me informed of progress. Dismissed." Palab waddled off toward Etah and the other grunts clearing the deck, as more damaged ships began to enter the Landing Deck. The two elites then walked toward the injured and began to look for those with the least injures.

"You should consider yourself lucky." Balmaeda stated.

Curiously the dock master returned, "What do you mean? Who is that grunt?"



"That grunt earned the right to be called a Sergeant, a warrior. Had you angered him, he may have killed you if only to prove that he is not weaker than us elites."

"No grunt can kill an elite, brother. You are simply boasting." The Dock Master chuckled to himself.

"No, I am not. Sergeant Palab is skilled in ways of combat unlike any grunt I have ever seen. He killed four brutes on the ring world, in one on one combat. He killed the Chieftain's first born, a battle I saw with my own eyes." Belmaeda added as he pointed out soldiers that were able to fight and directed them to their posts. The Dock Master simply stood in shock. Had that Grunt really killed a Brute in single combat?

The bridge of \_the Knight and Piercing Arrow\_ was littered with active elites, as the High Council Members and the Captain prepared for what would be a horrific sight; the destruction of \_High Charity\_. It was the only home they had known since the crusade against the humans had begun. Soon it would be all but a memory as the Arbiter and his team began their plan.

"So what you are suggesting is that we somehow convince three hundred Brute controlled ships to remain in orbit around \_High Charity\_, wait for it to explode, hope we can enter Slip Space before the shockwave hits, and then break off from the Arbiter's fleet?" Captain Timnaldee stated, as he folded his arms in front of him, but never turned his attention away from the forward view screen and the battle outside.

"Yes, if it goes that smoothly." The council elder stated with a calming voice. The other five council members merely listened to the discussion, not wanting to cause any confusion by putting in their opinions.

"I and the other Ship Masters agreed to aid the Arbiter." Timnaldee added. A nearby battle cruiser exploded just beyond the view screen and the light reflected brilliantly off of the young captain's gold armor. He simply ignored the closeness of the explosion and continued to glare out of the front view screen. "But you wish to take the heart of the Elite battle group, my ship, into Covenant controlled space. Forgive my rudeness Elder, but I have no plans to abandon the Arbiter."

"Listen Captain." Samyealee snapped. "If we could contact the Arbiter we would, but until he gives the signal, we can not contact him for fear of giving away his position. We need to return home, to warn the council further and to gather the grunts..."

The Captain spun on his heels and quickly closed the gap between himself and Councilor Samyealee. Samyealee's two guards quickly stepped in his path, cutting off the Ship Master's approach, but Samyealee nudged them to the side. He was aware that he was speaking out of turn toward the Ship Master, and even an Elder Councilor had to know his place.

"Grunts!" The captain roared. "You would have me weaken the battle group to gather grunts?"

"How else do you intend to win this dispute between us and the

Covenant? They have us outnumbered here on the front lines, and the Hierarchs split the elite fleet months ago. Nearly half of our forces are still in Covenant space. We need to meet with the council, organize and prepare for the worst. The Arbiters forces will join with the humans, as will the rest of the fleet. One ship, even this ship, will not make a difference."

"Permission to speak, Captain." Simyaldee questioned as he stepped forward. The Captain nodded his head sharply, hoping that the experienced Spec-Ops Elite could make sense of the discussion.

Simyaldee spoke up, trying to ease the tension between the Elder and the Captain. "The Brutes did much damage when they turned on us, many of our brethren perished during the first hour of fighting, simply because we were caught off guard. But the grunts have the element of surprise. While we have been greatly reduced, the Grunts still have far more numbers within the fleet. And if we can gather more of them from our home world, with a few of our brothers as well, we can build an army that the brutes would never expect."

"Tell the captain of Sergeant Palab." Samyealee suddenly added. "Tell him why the grunts would give us more of an advantage than just in numbers. Tell him of what you have seen and heard." Simyaldee squinted in frustration because he was hoping that Elder Samyealee wouldn't mention Palab. Timnaldee was like the rest of the young and ambitious elite warriors, and they all looked down on the grunts as nothing more than tools. Simyaldee knew that the captain wouldn't believe such a tale, he had seen it with his own eyes but still couldn't believe it himself.

"Perhaps we can discuss it later, Elder. Everything will be brought forth within its due time." Simyaldee quickly stated, patting the elder on the shoulder. It signaled to Samyealee that now was not the time to be discussing legends. He then turned his attention back to the Captain. "We can notify the Arbiter after his mission is successful, when he comes aboard."

The captain sighed heavily and looked to Simyaldee. "I have known your skill since I was but a foot soldier, and to see that you agree with thisâ€¦ course of action, then I must give it merit. I mean no disrespect to the Elder, but to break away from the fleet to gather gruntsâ€¦ I can not fathom it."

"I understand Captain." Simyaldee added. "You are the Ship Master, the final decision is yours, and we aren't one hundred percent sure that it will be successful."

"The odds are not stacked in your favor, brother." The Captain added as he turned his attention back to the battle outside. "You aren't giving me enough information toâ€¦" The captain stopped mid sentence as his eyes were fixed on several damaged Phantoms that were heading toward his ship. "Communications; hail that lead Phantom, now!"

"Sir, they are not responding, but they are putting off a distress signal." The Elite communications officer replied. "I cleared them to land earlier."

"Damn!" The captain shouted. "Are they in weapons range?"

"No sir, they are already within our shield envelope" what's wrong?" The com officer questioned, looking puzzled. Lieutenant Simyaldee quickly recognized what the captain also noticed.

"Elite pilots are not taught to pilot phantoms in that type of formation!" Simyaldee shouted.

"Lieutenant, sound general alarms. We have borders inbound." The Captain stated as he held his head high. He then gazed out of the forward view screen and continued to watch over the battle. "Lieutenant Simyaldee, see to the dispatch of those damned brutes. The rest of you, continue monitoring the battle." Simyaldee looked to the other two Mirrator warriors and they followed him to the door.

"Nothing gets on this bridge unless all the brutes are dead." Simyaldee whispered to the other two soldiers. "I will send more of our brothers to aid you and set up a blockade in the access path to this entrance. Protect the High Council at all costs." Simyaldee opened the door and stepped out.

He looked back before the door shut and softly stated; "For the Honor of the Mirrator." The other Elites replied softly, so that the others couldn't hear. The door slammed and locked. Simyaldee turned and ran down the hallway toward the docks.

Simyaldee turned on his com as he ran, "Palab, enemy Phantoms on approach!"

- - - - -

Palab stared blankly at the four Phantoms that had just landed on the deck. There was an eerie feeling that he couldn't shake and he walked closer to inspect it. There were eight more Phantoms that approached with the four that had just landed, a total of twelve, but the other eight had to wait for openings within the landing deck. Palab also noted that the other eight Phantoms had stopped just beyond the exit shield, in the dark void of space. Why were they waiting? There were other carriers in the second line that they could have gone to, but these twelve Phantoms seemed eager to land on the Knight and Piercing Arrow. Palab approached the landing pad, and the gravity lifts for all four phantoms descended. Palab instinctively sniffed the air, but he couldn't smell past the elite blood and smoke that filled the docks. Everything within Palab told him to sound the alarm, because these Phantoms were being too quiet, but then Lieutenant Simyaldee started screaming across his communicator.

"Palab, enemy Phantoms on approach!" The communication chattered in his ears. Palab froze and looked the Phantoms over quickly. Had the brutes intercepted that transmission? If so, what were they waiting for? The Phantoms still had the plasma turrets operational but they seemed offline. But that quickly changed.

A high pitched hum swelled across the docks as the plasma cells within the turrets were charged. Pulses of electricity raised the temperature of the Phantom's plasma cells and prepared them to spray the deck, and anything around it, into charred particles. Palab turned and dropped to all fours, sprinting across the deck towards a

few metallic crates in the distance.

"Take cover! Enemies!" Palab screamed as all four Phantoms began pouring plasma into all directions. Elites and grunts began diving for cover, dropping everything and running for their lives. Some made it, some were able to hide, but others were burned to death by the super heated plasma that screamed from the turrets. Palab peeped around the crate and noticed that the other eight Phantoms had left the entrance, most likely to attach to the hull of the ship. Palab's hiding spot was quickly discovered and plasma sprayed all around him. His crate wasn't going to last for long under the constant fire; he had to think. The crate was quickly heating up, and its mass was about to collapse upon itself. Then several canisters exploded from a stray Phantom blast. The Phantom rocked to the side, throwing off the targeting system just enough for Palab to make a dash for better cover. Palab slid behind a bulkhead and stopped beside two wounded elites and three grunts, and two of the grunts were from his team.

"You alright, sergeant?" One of the red armored grunts questioned.

"Me okay." He then contacted Simyaldee. "Sir, me and Landing Deck crews fight off brutes, other ships attaching to hull."

"\_I understand, Sergeant."\_ Simyaldee replied, he then switched frequencies and tapped into the ship wide communicator. "\_Attention brothers, the brutes have come aboard. Locate all hull breaches and destroy them. Show these brutes what it means to be a true warrior."\_

The com went silent and Palab realized that he was now on his own. He quickly looked over the landing deck as plasma bursts crisscrossed the room. Several wounded elites, and maybe two dozen grunts was all he had at his aid. The phantoms held at least fourteen brutes each; they were out numbered and clearly outgunned by those phantoms, but Palab knew that he wasn't out of options. There were four turret gunners stationed at the exits, just out of reach of the Phantoms plasma bursts. The supply caches were full and sitting at his fingertips. Even outnumbered, Palab knew that his rag-tag team could make one hell of a stand.

Palab looked to the Elite next him and said, "You get elites to exits, hold position there when Phantoms stop firing. Me and grunts attack."

"Why would the Phantoms stop firing?" The elite questioned. "They have us pinned down."

"If brutes want to attack, Phantoms stop shooting." Palab checked his armor and counted his remaining grenades. "Landing deck too small to fire plasma turrets and not hit brutes as well."

"Understood, but are you sure you wouldn't have us elites by your side? Even wounded, me and my brothers are willing to defend this ship."

"I give orders. You follow." Palab bluntly stated. He didn't have time to explain it to the elite, but his grunts were faster then him and his wounded men. Speed would be their advantage and he couldn't

take the time to stroke the wounded warrior's ego. He contacted Etah on his communicator, and spoke only in grunt language, knowing that the brutes wouldn't know what was being said. He also knew that the covenant Phantoms didn't have translators for grunt speak; yet another advantage for the grunts, their language didn't need to be scrambled.

"Etah, what is your location?" Palab barked into his com.

"I'm hiding behind a bulkhead at landing pad twelve. The Phantoms have me and the rest of my group pinned down." Etah barked and snarled his reply.

"How many of our team is in your group?" Palab questioned.

"Five." Etah snarled his response.

"Good. I have two more of the team here." Palab peeped around the bulkhead and spotted Etah and his group waving from the corner on the other side of the Dock. "I see you. Now listen. The Phantoms will stop shooting and the brutes will begin their assault. When the Phantoms stop shooting, get to that weapons cache in front of you, and grab some Fuel Rod cannons. Then get your team to the second floor of the landing deck, and bomb the hell out of these brutes. Me and my two men will provide distractions for you and your team. Move fast, we won't have much time.

"Understood." Etah replied.

"Sir what about us?" Barked more grunts over the com. "There's four of us and we are two bulkheads toward the aft of the landing deck." Palab looked up and saw more of his team, they were some of the grunts that stood by his side and fought the brutes on Delta Halo. They were able to mimic his fighting style.

Palab felt a sense of joy in seeing them, happy that he would have them at his side again. "Good! When the Phantoms stop firing you guys run to my side. We will attack the Brutes head on, just like on Delta Halo. Make sure you have plenty of grenades." As if on cue, the Phantoms ceased firing. Brutes and jackals began pouring onto the deck from the belly of the Phantoms. Palab looked to his teams and they were all on fours, sprinting across the deck. The two grunts behind him quickly joined in and matched his speed stride for stride. It was time for the Grunts to prove their worth.

- - - - -

The command deck was ghostly silent with the exception of battle reports that were being shouted from the com officer. The captain still showed no sign of concern as he clasped his hands behind his back and peered at the view screens; analyzing the battle and waiting for the Arbiter's signal.

"Command crew, arm your blades in case the command deck is over run." The captain shouted. The command crew grabbed plasma rifles and energy swords and attached them to their sides, but returned to their posts without a second thought. Captain Timnaldee had disciplined his crew well. They were not affected or surprised by anything that was happening around them, even when the Simyaldee cut across the ship wide com channel.

"\_Attention brothers, the brutes havecome aboard. Locate all hull breaches and destroy them. Show these brutes what it means to be a true warrior." \_

Simyaldee's words gave the two High Council bodyguards a reason to roar. The two Mirrator warriors could feel that the battle was going to come straight to them, and they waited eagerly for it to come. But they also knew that the brutes would have to fight the full compliment of the ship before getting close to the command deck. Despite the roar the two elites made, the command crew never batted an eye lash. Their duties were clear, if battle came they would fight, but till then their jobs were at their stations.

"Captain, if I may ask a favor?" Elder Samyealee approached the captain's platform in the center of the command deck. The other four council members stood quietly in the corner of the command deck. "Can you spare a view screen so that I can see how Sergeant Palab is doing on the Landing Deck?" The captain sighed, and walked to a nearby station and typed in a few commands. In thin air several lines began to fizz into view, and the landing deck was displayed. Plasma fire was erupting from the phantoms and a lone grunt took cover. The elder was pleased to see Palab take shelter but was nervous at what the grunt would do to get himself out of the situation.

"It would appear that grunt is in for a great deal of pain." The captain stated. "Is that the grunt you placed in charge of my Landing Deck?"

"That is Sergeant Palab. He will solve this problem. Don't worry, everything will be fine." Curiosity was the only thing keeping the captain's attention on the view screen, as Palab escaped the bombardment of plasma when a canister of weapons exploded near the Phantom. The Captain, Elder Samyealee, the other councilors and the two bodyguards watched as Palab and his team suddenly darted from cover and charged the brutes and jackals.

- - - - -

Surprise was the best element the grunts had. Darting behind canisters and bulkheads, Palab and his team had to buy time for Etah and his group to get into position. Palab turned a corner without breaking stride and four of his grunts fell into line behind him. The Brutes still hadn't seen the grunts because they were too busy gloating over the bodies of elites that were shot by the Phantoms. But the jackals weren't so cocky. They spotted Palab's group and immediately started firing with Plasma Pistols. But their shots were way off target and the Grunts were able to take cover.

On the opposite side of the Landing Deck, Etah and his group quickly tore open the weapons cache and began carrying off the Fuel Rods and ammo. But the jackals spotted them and began to charge, and soon the brutes also gave chase.

Etah stopped and faced the charging enemies as the rest of his squad raced for the exit. Etah raised his fuel rod cannon and fired on the lot of them, killing several of the jackals but the brutes kept coming. Several more shots followed but the brutes avoided the obvious attack.

"They can see my shots." Etah grumbled as the brutes advanced. "Fuel rod projectiles are too slow at this range."

"Etah, hurry!" One of the grunts shouted from the doorway.

"I'm coming!" Etah turned and ran to the door. When he entered he saw that his team was waiting with Fuel Rods and a stationary gun charged and ready. Etah dived clear as the brutes and jackals turned the corner. The brutes only had enough time to gasp, as the jackals in front of them were washed away by green flames of plasma. The wave of plasma surged towards the brutes as the grunts fired in unison, blast after blast. One Phantom's compliment had been wiped out and Etah's small squad cheered with excitement. The elites manning the landing deck doors sighed in relief. Etah took a deep breath and looked to everyone.

"We go to second level now." Etah stated in covenant tongue. "Elites stay, keep brutes out." The celebration ended and the squad shuffled up the ramp to the second level; reloading their fuel rods for the next bombardment.

Palab looked to the far end of the deck, just after the explosion had rocked the Landing Deck. He saw the debris, and corpses, settle from the explosion. The blast had come from Etah's general direction. Had they escaped? Did they get away? Palab was full of questions but there was no time to dwell, if he didn't keep moving then he would surely be killed by the brutes, or even worse, shot by one of the stupid jackals.

Palab turned the corner of a crate and a jackal shrieked. Palab was standing less than a foot from the jackal's shield. They had finally closed the gap between their enemies and themselves and Palab knew that it was time to fight.

"Scatter and attack." Palab barked to the other grunts behind him. They all obeyed and leapt into the fray of brutes and jackals. They dodged and darted around the brutes with such aggression and swiftness that the Brutes didn't know what to make of it. Grunts were supposed to flee, cower, and run, but these grunts seemed almost excited about the chaos that was happening around them.

Plasma blasts exploded all around, brutes slammed their fists in rage and missed them by inches; and the grunts seemed unbothered by any of it. One grunt jumped into the air grabbed a jackal by its thin spiked hair, and slammed its head into the metal deck, killing it instantly. Other jackals were falling left and right, but the grunts weren't shooting, they were using their bare hands.

"Warriors, regroup!" A Brute shouted, sounding shocked and confused. The brutes began to fall back but four grunts had cut off their retreat. The brutes hesitated and then Palab stood behind them with two grunts at his side; surrounding the Brutes. The brutes then began to realize that most of the jackals had been killed off by only seven Grunts.

"Grunts!" The lead Brute shouted in rage.

Several explosions began to erupt around the other Phantoms and the Brute saw that his teams were dying left and right. He then spotted the grunts on the second level, firing their Fuel Rod Cannons.

Despite the deaths of his other warriors on the other three Phantoms, he was not going to be pushed back by seven grunts.

Palab also heard the explosions going off around him, and realized that Etah and his team had made it. They could take care of the other jackals and brutes but Palab wanted this batch all for himself. Two jackals stood in front of the brutes and they ducked behind their shields and began firing. Palab ignored the jackals and dashed between them; he wanted the Brutes. The two grunts at Palab's side swarmed in behind him and quickly subdued the stunned jackals; their speed and jumping ability proving to be too much for them to handle.

Palab lunged toward the first brute with a blind rage as the beast swung his massive fist at him. Palab balanced himself in the air, catching the brute's fist, and twisted his tiny body so that his weight would counter the brute's punch. In mid air, Palab used his forward progress and rolled over the brute's fist, and jammed his tiny elbow spike into the brute's eye. The small bone sticking out of his elbow made short work of the soft tissue, and the momentum carried it deeper into the Brutes skull.

The brute screamed as he fell backwards and Palab held on as they fell. Once the brute hit the deck Palab jabbed his hoof into the massive beast's neck; applying force with his legs strength. A soft gurgle came from the brute as it slowly gasped for breath. This combined with the head trauma from Palab's elbow spike, gave the brute a slow painful death. The other Brutes began to stomp their fists in anger. They charged at Palab but he jumped clear and landed a few feet away. He snarled deeply and the other six grunts encircled the remaining pack of brutes.

The three Brutes were stunned, furious, and terrified; all at the same time. The other Grunts simply formed a circle around them, pacing in a small circle that seemed to grow smaller and smaller with each second. But Palab stood toe to toe with the massive beasts. The brutes would swing their fists at him, but Palab was too elusive. They would reach for their weapons, but the other grunts would snarl and hold out Plasma Grenades; as if to dare them to try and use sidearm.

"You use guns, we use grenades." Palab growled with his best Covenant speak.

"What are you?" One of the brutes questioned. From across the deck, an explosion sounded and ten elites rushed into the Landing Deck. They raced across the deck toward the three remaining brutes and took aim with their plasma rifles.

"Good job Sergeant." Simyaldee stated as approached the group. "These Prisoners will be quite useful." But Palab ignored his words.

The grunt Sergeant jumped toward the three brutes and jammed his right thumb into the brute's left eye. He gripped the brute's head with his right hand and held on. The brute screamed and grabbed Palab by the shoulders. Palab ignored the brute's grasp and forced his thumb deeper into the brute's head. Blood dripped down his hand and the brute roared in anger.

The brute forcefully pushed against Palab, struggling to get the



snarling grunt off of him. He then began to grab Palab's waist and squeeze. Instead of pushing Palab away, he began to pull him closer. He flung his arms around him and began a bone crushing embrace.

Palab pulled his thumb out of the brute's eye and struggled to get free of the death grip. He had no leverage, and could feel the brute's dense muscles expand with every second. He was finding it hard to breath and even harder to think clearly. But Palab felt something in his arms; a pain that suddenly began to burn up his forearms and into his elbows. It was as if his forearm muscles were responding on their own. The pain intensified, almost making him forget that he was being crushed by a massive ball of fur and muscle. Palab couldn't contain the pain any longer, and as he yelled his elbow spikes extended out of his skin like retractable claws.

Palab jabbed his elbow downward and into the brute's shoulder blade, deep enough that the spike sank into its lower lung cavity. The brute tried to roar in pain, but only the gargled sound of his own blood spilled from his jowls. Palab kicked the brute's loosened arms away and stabbed his other elbow into the base of the brute's throat. The brute began to fall backwards and Palab's extended elbow claw passed through the brute's spine and into the metal deck, killing the brute instantly.

"Sergeant!" Simyaldee shouted in protest. He had wanted to question the brutes before killing them. The other six grunts quickly turned toward Simyaldee and snarled madly.

"You no speak to him like that!" One of the grunts shouted. The group began to stalk toward Simyaldee, snarling madly, but the other elites stepped forward, aiming their rifles at the grunts. The grunts didn't stop. They growled and came closer forcing Simyaldee and his team to back away.

"Stand down. That's an order!" Simyaldee's words were falling onto deaf ears, but Palab quickly jumped between his team and the Lieutenant. The brute's blood was splattered across his black armor, and dripped from his extended elbows spikes and hands. Palab began to snarl and bark loudly at his team and they slowly stepped back. Palab then turned and looked to the second level and Simyaldee followed his glare.

Above the elite's heads, standing upon the second level, stood Etah and his team. They were snarling harshly and waiting for a moment to pounce down on top of the elites, but that's not all Simyaldee saw. While only Palab's twelve grunts seemed to be fighting, the other grunts had been watching, and they were also eager to come to Palab's aid. Simyaldee stood silent, his mouth open in awe.

"They understand now." Palab stated to Simyaldee. He then watched as Palab's elbow spikes slowly retracted back into the tiny grunts long forearms; returning to their normal length.

"What do they understand?" Simyaldee asked.

"They follow orders, like always. Brutes captured, sir." Palab looked to the two brutes that were left and snarled softly at them. The two brutes could only stare in amazement.

Simyaldee turned to the elites at his side. "Take them to the brig." Four Elites quickly cuffed the brutes and escorted them off the landing deck. "Palab, we aren't done yet. We've only found four of the other Phantoms, there are four more connected somewhere on the lower decks."

"Me take team and search." Palab stated. He yelled up to Etah in grunt speak, and Etah and his team made their long trip down to the main Deck.

"Before you go, there is something I must do." Simyaldee stated. He then waved off all the other grunts and elites, leaving only the elites that bore the purple bar of the Mirrator. Etah and the other grunts in his team soon arrived and the twelve grunts quickly assembled in front of Simyaldee. He then placed small buttons on the black armor of the Grunts and a purple bar appeared on their shoulders. "With these buttons comes great honor. I certify that you are warriors amongst warriors, the best of the best. Palab, you and your team of eleven grunts are now considered the Right Hand of the High Council. You will follow my orders, the Commander's orders and the orders of the Elite High Council. You will do all for the upkeep of our bond and protect the High Council. I officially welcome you, to the Mirrator."

- - - - -

The screen suddenly went black as Simyaldee began to place buttons on each of the twelve grunts and Ship Master Timnaldee gasped in shock. He felt as though he hadn't taken a breath since he started watching the battle on the Landing Deck.

"What has happened?" He questioned sharply. "Why did you terminate the transmission?" The councilors all walked toward the Captain and each smiled softly. But it was Elder Samyealee that spoke.

"As Ship Master you, and only you, are entitled to know this." Samyealee stated. The other council members looked around to be sure that their conversation was private, and then each nodded their head giving the all clear signal. "I will tell you more once we have a bit more privacy, but the bodyguards of the High Council have another title. They are more than just Special Operations. Rin Simyaldee just inducted the grunts into our group of bodyguards."

"What group?" The captain softly replied.

"Tell me Captain, have you ever heard of the Mirrator?" Samyealee questioned. The captain was silent, and then looked to the group of High Council Members and then to the guards at the door. He simply nodded his head.

"I understand. We will speak more of this once we enter Slip Space." The captain walked back to his position and for the first time during the battle he began to show concern. His concern was not for the battle in front of him, but for the lack of knowledge he had for his crew.

The Mirrator was often rumored to have had a hand in many dealings where there was direct affect to the High Council, and even the Prophet of Truth was hesitant to dispute against the High Council for some unknown reason. It appeared that the Rumor was true, the

Mirrator was real. The legendary warriors that protected the elite society from the shadows were no longer a legend.

"Captain!" The main helmsman screamed. "The human ship within \_High Charity\_ is reaching critical mass!"

"That is the signal!" The captain calmly replied. He had to maintain his discipline else his crew would also become nervous. "Com, notify the fleet to begin descent toward the base of \_High Charity\_. We don't have much time before \_High Charity\_ blows. Be sure to bait the Brutes as best as we can. Any ships that can not follow are ordered to defend themselves as best as possible, and we will not forget their sacrifice."

The fleet of two hundred and thirty elite vessels began to bank and arc toward the base of the onetime holy city, \_the Knight and Piercing Arrow\_ was last; firing its aft plasma cannons at the brute controlled ships that gave chase. The brutes took the bait and began to pursue the elites; matching \_the Knight and Piercing Arrow's\_ speed. \_High Charity's\_ mass provided excellent cover for the forward elite ships as they entered slip space, one-by-one. The brutes were unable to detect the elite ships escape on their instruments because \_High Charity's\_ massive electromagnetic signal.

"Captain, the brutes are still in pursuit and the forward ships have already entered slip space." The Navigations officers stated. "The brutes don't suspect a thing."

"Any word from the Arbiter's team?"

"None captain." The com officer replied.

"Entering \_High Charity's\_ gravity well in five!" The helm officer shouted. High Charity's massive gravity-well began to pull on the hull of \_the Knight and Piercing Arrow\_ and the ship began to groan and rumble from the G-forces. "We've reached the peak!"

"Set slip space coordinates, and scan for the Arbiter's team!" The Captain yelled over the constant vibration and moan of the hull. The ship rolled into position and the command crew began yelling out their tasks.

"Captain, \_High Charity\_ is now going critical!"

"I've got them! Two Phantoms dead ahead!"

"Slip Space Rupture in ten seconds!"

"Contact the Landing Deck, two Phantoms are coming in at maximum speed!"

"Sub-space Rupture altered, inputting coordinates!"

"Engines at Maximum!"

"Weapons system shutting down!"

"Slip Space Rupture at full!"

"Lost contact with the Landing Deck, Phantoms no longer on

visual!"

"Massive EMP surge at aft, High Charity is gone!"

"All hands brace for impact!"

"Now Entering Rupture!"

\_The Knight and Piercing Arrow\_ jostled as \_High Charity's\_ explosion tossed them to the side.

"Critical Alarms!"

"Engines overloading!"

"Hull ruptures on deck twelve thru nine!"

"Life support down to minimum!"

"Helm, get this ship stabilized!"

"Navigations is down, we are flying blind!"

"We're loosing Slip Space containment!"

"Contain hull breaches!"

"Emergency teams to decks thirteen and eight!"

"Loosing control of the helm!"

"Plasma ruptures on the outer hull!"

"We are loosing slip space containment!"

"Thrusters offline! We are in a blind spin!"

"Maintenance team, we need thruster support, now!"

"Unknown AI detected in the system core!"

"What?"

"Slip Space Containment re-established!"

"That can't be! It was in full collapse!"

"Hmm, aren't you all lucky I came on board?" A female voice stated over the intercom.

"Who said that?"

"No response from the helm!"

"Track that AI! Regain control!"

"Source of transmission unknown, Sir! It came from the AI!"

"Sir, primary system shut down eminent!"

"We're in an Axis Spin!"

"Engine Failure, engine failure! Shutting down Slip Space drive!"

"Status on thrusters!"

"Still down!"

"We should shut down the primary system!"

"No need to do that. I'll take it from here, if you don't mind." The female voice calmly stated over the intercom.

## 8. Racial Tension

\*\*"Racial Tension"\*\*

Elite home world: Dorenth

> Capital City of Jogrennilee<br> The High Council chamber; "\_Well of Honored Souls\_"

"This Covenant has not been disgraced!" The Prophet High Council Member stated sharply to the council. His voice echoed across the massive room so that all could hear. "The Arbiter is lying, in a feeble attempt to take command and divide the fleet."

"Then explain why the Hierarchs have yet to speak." An elite member of the High council returned. This clearly caught the Prophet off guard and he turned to his peers, speaking only so that only they could hear him. The Elite stepped away from the podium to consult with the other High Council Members of Elites. He was the high elder, and spoke on behalf of his council. Age, wisdom and numerous battle garnered him this position and he was a worthy leader.

He leaned closer to his kin and spoke softly, "This is pathetic. They clearly have no clue as to what is happening with the Hierarchs. This smells of a false. They mean to deceive us even more than they already have."

"I say we toss aside this frail tarp, and slaughter every single one of those pathetic Prophets." An elite stated from the rear of the group, four rows up in the stadium style seating. "This is our world, our home, and they dare to bring this mockery of an excuse to the council! I will not stand for it!"

The high elder elite waived his hand in soothing fashion toward the angry elite. "Calm yourself brother." He looked over the group of High Council Elites sitting before him and then turned to face the Prophets on the other side. He looked back to his brothers and could see the blood and fury in their eyes. The Prophets have never revealed the truth and even now they seem to be keeping secrets. He rubbed his brow with his left hand and massaged the scar that crossed his forehead, and recalled the many battles he had experienced in his youth, all for the sake of the Covenant. "I have but one more question for these cowards. And then we shall see what our next action shall be, but do not forget, the Brutes are waiting outside of the council chambers. If we start trouble we will have to face them." The group of elite councilors nodded their heads, but each jostled at

their energy swords; itching to put them to use. The high elder turned to the podium and glared at the Prophets as they continued to talk amongst themselves.

The high elder stepped to the podium and gazed across the chamber floor toward the opposing side, where the prophets sat and whispered. "We have waited long enough for you to create a lie. Where are the Hierarchs? Surely their wisdom wouldn't allow for the Arbiter to speak uncontested." The Prophet stepped forward, clearly annoyed and nervous as he fidgeted with the amplifier controls.

"As you know, Regret was killed by the Demon." The Prophet slowly stated, as if to buy himself some time. Every elite across from the prophets could sense his hesitation and his fear. The prophets were up to something. "This prompted the Hierarchs to take drastic measures by placing the brutes as the Royal Honor Guards." The Elder Elite turned to his kin and spoke softly to one of them. He turned back and faced the Prophet who was still speaking slowly. "Since then we have not heard any word from the Prophets of Mercy and Truth." The side door to the chamber opened and in walked several brutes, armed and looking directly to the elites side of the Council Chambers.

The high elder elite looked to the brutes in protest. "What is this? You know the policy, Prophet. This meeting is for the High Council only." Quickly the elite behind the elder jumped up and raced from the seating area and opened the side door to the chamber. Soon twenty five Elites stormed in, each wearing a purple bar upon their shoulder. "Remove these brutes from the Council Chamber, Prophet, or you will be in contempt of this meeting!" The prophets had been stalling for time, waiting for the brutes to enter the chamber in a massive number.

"It is you that is in contempt, Sangheili! If you stand with the Arbiter, and his forces, then you have separated yourselves from our covenant."

"You would disgrace everything that our ancestors have died to protect?" The high elder gripped the side of the podium, his voice growing deeper and deeper as the elites behind him grew more and more furious. "You have used us, lied to us, and betrayed our trust for the last time, Prophets! We gave you a home amongst our brothers since you had no world of your own! It was us that protected you, and if these brutes will stand at your side, then we shall hunt down all of you and your races and slaughter you like the unjust creatures you are! Never shall you speak our honored names again! To hear the word Sangheili from your tongue is an insult to every elite that has died under your banner!"

The prophet snarled through his ageing lips. "Your Arbiter, our instrument, leads his forces against us! And thusly, you shall all burn at his side! For the Covenant, we shall dispose of you, and during the hour of the Great Journey you shall all be left behind!"

The high elder tossed the podium to the side, ripping it from the floor in his rage. Just as quickly, he freed his energy sword from the slot on his belt. The blade hissed to life as sixty pounds of forged plasma exploded from the hilt. He pounced into the center of the chamber, his robe trailing behind him, and raced across the floor toward the Brutes that protected the Prophets. The single blades of

the Mirrator'd blazed to life in each of the warrior's hands, as they eagerly ran ahead of the high elder to ensure that he would not fall to the brutes.

With twenty five members of the Mirrator'd at his side, and twelve council members pulling up the rear, the High Council of Elites would not rest until the heads of the prophets rolled at their feet. The \_Well of Honor Souls\_ rumbled with the battle cry of elite and brute warriors, and for the first time since the grunt rebellion, blood soaked its marble floors.

- - - - -

The lights flickered on and Ship Master Timnaldee stood to his feet. The \_Knight and Piercing Arrow\_ had just tumbled through slip space, however they had survived. He assisted elder Samyealee, and looked to his command crew.

"Report." Timnaldee commanded.

"Systems returning to normal."

"Engineering reporting that all downed systems will be back to normal within the hour. However, the slip space engine will need further work."

"The Arbiter's team is on board, captain. They want to know when we can begin our journey to the Ark." The Captain looked perplexed; he was confused as to how they survived such an intense ride in slip space.

"First off, what is the status of that AI?" The captain demanded.

"I'm function fine, thank you for asking." Cortana softly stated through the command Deck intercom. "But I assume you have more pressing questions. Basically, I'm with Arbiter, and from what I can see, I just saved all of your lives, so a little patience is in order while I check this ship's systems." Cortana paused for what seemed like ten seconds, and then quickly opened up a view screen of the Landing Deck. On the screen was the Arbiter, the Spec Ops Commander, two humans, several Grunts, Palab and Simyaldee.

"Commander Keys, Arbiter, this ship is dead in the water for at least several hours." Cortana stated to both the Landing Deck Crew and the Command Crew. "I advise we find another ride. The slip space drive has a massive rupture that will take time to repair."

"Very well, construct." The Arbiter stated on the view screen.

"I've asked you to not call me that." Cortana sighed. "Nobody seems to care about my feelings anymore."

"Don't worry, Cortana." Sergeant Johnson stated. "As many times as you've saved my neck, you know I love ya."

"Flattery will get you everywhere, Sergeant." Cortana chuckled. "The rest of the fleet, if you'd call it that, is just beyond sensor range, Arbiter. Under normal propulsion we can rendezvous with them in five minutes."

The Arbiter nodded. "Captain, we can not wait. We have already lost much time. We will venture to another ship and proceed with the fleet to the Ark."

"I understand Arbiter." The Captain replied. "I ask your permission to take another course of action, once our systems have been repaired."

"What might that be, Captain?" The Arbiter asked.

"A situation that, I can not explain, has taken place onboard. We will need to venture to our home world. All I know is that hopefully we can add the grunts to our Alliance, officially, as supposed to how they have been forced into our group now. We must go and speak with the high council, and also to fully alert them of the situation here on the front lines." Elder Samyealee was somewhat surprised by the Captain's wording, but it was a very clear way of presenting it to the Arbiter.

The Arbiter cast his eyes downward in thought, but then returned his gaze to the view screen. "Very well, Captain. It is possible that this treachery has spread to our home. But we will need you to spare any able bodied soldiers. I'm sorry, but I must leave you with only a skeleton crew, and the High Council."

Cortana suddenly interrupted. "Just a second, Arbiter. Captain, there are several Brutes on board, lower level, I've sealed them off and trapped them in the lower compartments. They won't bother you for a while, but I'm sure they'll find a way to blast those doors down."

Timnaldee looked to the view screen, "Simyaldee."

"Already ahead of you captain." Simyaldee replied. He turned to the pack of grunts at his side. "Sergeant Palab, you and your team with me." Simyaldee and his men, along with Palab and his team, quickly scurried out of the Landing Deck. But not before the Arbiter took notice of how swiftly the grunts were running; almost passing the elites.

The Arbiter curiously turned to the Spec Ops commander. "Did he say, Sergeant Palab?"

Awkwardly, the Commander rubbed his jaw as he smirked. "That was my doing, Arbiter. It's a long story, and one that I can fill you in on as we depart." He motioned to a nearby Phantom and the group started walking toward it.

Commander Keyes folded her arms as she began to follow the elites. "Cortana, you can assist in the ship repairs for as long as you can, but don't get left behind." Johnson began to follow the elites that were going after the trapped brutes but Commander Keyes gave him a quick stare. He understood the gaze, realizing that she didn't want him getting involved. Johnson sighed heavily, shouted something obscene, and returned to the Commander Keyes' side.

"Eye-eye, Commander." Cortana began to monitor and advise the elite repair teams on the best way to fix the slip space engine, and the location of the brute's strike team. With her help the brutes were



defeated easily, but her stay onboard the \_Knight and Piercing Arrow\_ had come to an end. She transferred herself to the Phantom in which the Arbiter, Keys, Johnson, the Spec Ops Commander had boarded, and they disembarked to another ship. Several other Phantoms also departed from the Landing Deck, leaving only a skeleton crew onboard; ten percent of her full compliment.

Things became quiet as the fleet slipped out of the system; leaving the partially crippled \_Knight and Piercing Arrow\_ to deal with her own future. Several hours passed and the engines slowly hummed to life.

"Captain, all systems are normal." The head engineering Elite stated. "We can depart at anytime." The Captain thought to himself that if the Engineers had been onboard they might have made repairs a lot faster, but for now he could only trust in the Elites trained to maintain the engines.

The captain returned to his calm posture and glared over his command crew. "Helm, set slip space coordinates to the Dorenth. Also, tell the Simyaldee and Sergeant Palab to meet me in my quarters. Alert me if any problems arise." The captain clasped his arms behind his back and left the command platform. As he neared the aft bridge door he passed the group of councilmen. "Elder Samyealee, if you will all come with me. I think we have time to discuss the events of the past few hours."

- - - - -

It was a long journey through slip space to the elite home world, and a great majority of it would be traveling through Covenant controlled space. Even with the fleet attacking Earth, and searching for the Ark, the Covenant's inner colonies were not left defenseless.

Inside the Ship Master's chambers, Captain Timnaldee and his guests sat quietly; each pondering the delicate moment.

The room's intercom buzzed softly, "\_Captain. We are now entering covenant controlled space."\_

"Begin silent running." The captain stated into his desk communicator. "Slip space in this area will be heavily monitored, and even our vessel will be tracked. Be sure to stay on course, and do not try to camouflage or mask our trail. Let them think we're just a normal ship. Notify me at once if any ships begin to pursue."

"\_Yes captain."\_ The navigator replied. The channel went silent and the room was once again quiet. At the door stood one grunt, Etah, and four members of the Mirrator; including Ladme Balmaeda, the father of Doz Yammaeda. In front of the Captain's desk sat Palab, Simyaldee and elder Samyealee of the High Council. Just opposite of the desk, near a window, stood the other four members of the High Council. The lights became a few decibels dimmer, a clear sign to the crew that silent running had been ordered, which meant that talking was to be kept at a minimum.

The Captain didn't expect such a large turnout for this meeting, but considering that his skeleton crew was made up of some of the most important elites within their society, he didn't think too harshly of it. His gaze traveled from his elite brothers, to the tiny grunt that

sat across from him. The grunt sat proudly in the presence of such honored elites and did not appear uncomfortable at all. The captain couldn't help but chuckle at the small odd looking creature as it fought the sleep that was trying to overtake him. The captain then noticed the purple bar on his shoulder, the same bar that every elite guard was wearing.

"First offâ€¦" The captain softly stated. "â€¦ tell me of the Mirratord."

Samyealee cleared his throat. "I am nothing but a council member now. So I will leave that information in the hands of the Mirratord Second; Simyaldee." The captain turned his attention quickly to the elite at his right, the experienced warrior Simyaldee. Palab snapped to attention, fighting his sleep, and listened attentively. He also wanted to know more about the group into which he was just brought into.

"Captain." Simyaldee stated. "Under the leadership of the Special Operations Commander, I am his Second. We serve the High council of Elites as their Right Hand; the hand that works. We are bodyguards, protectors, assassins, peacemakers, murders, and thieves. We do the things that must be done, when talk is no longer an option. We are secret, we are quiet, but we work for the proud honor of the Elites, and for the safety of the Council. We have maintained the balance of elite and prophet power struggle, and we will continue to keep the high council safe."

"I see." The captain stated softly. "So then it was your group that caused the turmoil on Primus; when the prophets wanted to send the brutes to the human colony?" The Captain lowered his eyes waiting for a reply.

"Yes." Samyealee added. "The high council was aware that the prophets were beginning to favor the brutes. We needed to show them that we were still their most trusted allies. Primus gave us an extended stronghold within the Covenant, but the prophets were still looking for a way to cast us down. Nothing could have prevent that."

"It was Primus that I earned the right to become Ship Master. But we are not here to discuss the battles of the past. I wish to know more of the Mirratord. Does the Purple bar indicate your loyalties?"

Simyaldee nodded his head, agreeing to Timnaldee's question. "Yes. The Purple bar, from seen afar is nearly invisible, but stands out when viewed up close. One must earn the title of Mirratord, and only the First and Second can award warriors with this title. There is a training process for the younger members, but mostly we select those of great strength, courage, and skill."

"You say that the Mirratord is the right hand of the High Council of Elites." The Captain stated as he shifted forward into his seat. He began to glare at Palab, who returned the glare without hesitation; not backing down from anyone that showed aggression toward him. "Tell me then. Why is this Grunt given the title of Sergeant and bares the bar of the Mirratord?"

"Captain, you saw his fight in the Landing deck." Samyealee softly added. "Surely you can understandâ€¦"

"What I saw is not important. What I want to know is why? Simyaldee, you do understand my question, do you not?" Simyaldee sat quietly for a moment, and then turned to look at Samyealee. The elder nodded his head softly with a sigh, and Simyaldee understood that it was time to tell the truth.

"We believe that Palab is what the Grunts callâ€¦ a Messiah." Everyone sat quietly as Simyaldee explained. "The grunts have a legend. It spoke of a leader who would free them from our control, and lead them back to their homeland. This, Messiah, would rise up against the elites and lead his grunts on a great journey home. As all of you know, the grunts did rebel many years ago. Their king, who sat upon the council and represented his kin, wished to withdraw from the Covenant. This was not acceptable, and the Prophets ordered his death. Since then the grunts have been without a leader, and thusly obey whatever they are told to do. The Prophets went against the wishes of the Elite High Council." Palab's ears perked up as the Lieutenant spoke of the rebellion. Such information was never allowed for the Grunts to learn. "The details of the Arbiter's encounter was only given to the Hierarchs, but some information was passed onâ€¦ by other means. It was learned that the king hid most of his fighting potential, and his abilities were much like Sergeant Palab's. He had the ability to naturally lead, and every Grunt followed without regard for their safety."

Samyealee quickly jumped into the conversation, "The grunts have always been a pack society. They are born in litters and maintain close ties to their pack brothers, but despite their cowardly nature at times, they will quickly follow the orders of a strong leader; mainly us elites."

"Until now." Simyaldee continued. "We can not continue controlling the grunts as the prophets have done in the past. It is because of the Grunt Rebellion that most grunts have never seen their home. After the rebellion, the prophets demanded that two breeders be taken from the grunt home world, and they have lived on High Charity for the better part of the war against the humans, and of course other breeders were born and the grunts multiplied greatly, but we are all aware of this. The Prophets wanted to be sure that the seeds of the king would never rise again. According to the records we acquired, there are two signs of the king; retractable spikes on his elbows and higher then normal intelligence."

Samyealee commented, "We wanted to show Palab and his kin, that things are different now that the prophets no longer lead us. Lead by example not control."

"So inducting him and his team into the Mirratord was a show of faith; a union?" The captain questioned.

"Not quite." Samyealee returned. "That was the Second's decision, I'm sure, but the true sign of our Union will come when we reach our home world." Samyealee turned and looked to Palab who was shockingly quiet. The little grunt was listening and taking all of the information in. "When we arrive, it will be up to Palab to rally his Grunts and make the choice to Join with us, or â€¦" Samyealee stopped mid sentence, and thought on how to say the words delicately.

"Or what, elder?" The captain questioned.

"Or leave our alliance." Samyealee replied.

Timnaldee sat up straight and huffed at the idea. "That is much for such a young grunt to carry. What will be your course of action, Sergeant, once we arrive at Dorenth?" All eyes stared toward Palab, and he thought deeply on what to do. He didn't want to be different, a King or a Messiah, he only wanted to help his grunts to get home. Home, the word gave him a quick chill. He wanted it more than anything, to be home, to see the world of the grunts with his own eyes. To help his kindred to reach a world that he had only heard of from the grunts of old. But helping his grunts return home would mean facing the elite council on Dorenth, and meeting with the grunts that live there.

"Right now, me not know." Palab stated to the group. "Me special, me agree, but me not know grunts on elite home world. They not know war, or know brutes, me think. Me need to talk to grunts on elite home planet. Me need to know what they want, andâ€¦"

The captain quickly cut across Palab, saying, "Very diplomatic of you, Sergeant. But this is war time. If the brutes defeat us, then the prophets will surely expect your kin to obey them, otherwise your world will end up just as all the other worlds we have been forced to slaughter." The captain stood to his feet and leaned across his desk. "So far, I have seen two sides to you; a brilliant thinker and a blood thirsty killer." Palab felt a shudder take over him as the captain pressed closer. "You killed a brute after they had clearly been defeated and you almost seemed to enjoy slaughtering them." The captain leaned further over his desk, now only a few inches from Palab's face. Palab was getting more and more agitated as the Captain pressed forward. He could feel Timnaldee's anger toward him.

Timnaldee slammed his fist on his desk, "No matter what you have done till this moment, all I see before me is a simple grunt. Show me, grunt. Which are you; a warrior or a leader?" The captain could feel the tension boiling from within Palab, he could feel it as well as see it, but he didn't care. No Grunt deserved anything from an elite.

Palab couldn't sit still. His body was screaming to pounce. His elbows spikes were burning with the desire to be released. Palab's knees began to quiver, not in fear, but because he was holding back his aggression. He gazed deeply at the captain's throat, he could clearly see the veins and he could visualize his elbow slitting them. The captain's eyes were peering at him like a hunter chasing its prey, and Palab wanted his blood; he wanted to kill the captain with every ounce of his being. But the captain's gaze left him. He was looking at something else now. Palab wanted to know what the Captain was looking at and fought the rage that was consuming him. Caution kept his nerves sharp and Palab whipped his eyes to his side but quickly returned to the captain. In a split second, Palab had grasped the site of everything happening to his side, and it instantly brought him back to reality. Had he not been so blinded by his own anger towards the captain, he would have heard the commotion behind him. His aggression passed and he could hear the struggle clearly. Palab leapt from his seat and gazed across the room into the fury driven eyes of his older brother Etah.

Two Mirrator'd Elites were pinning Etah to the ground and were barely able to contain him. His rage seemed to increase his strength and the elites were slowly losing their hold. Etah snarled and growled ferociously as he tried to free himself, but the whole time his eyes never left the captain's. Palab knew what it was. It was the same feeling that worked through the other grunts on the Landing Deck. Without saying a word the grunts seemed to almost feel Palab's emotions, and they were feverish over it.

The two elites were losing control of Etah, he was slowly getting free. Etah was desperate to attack the captain, but none of the other elites seemed to want to help stop him, as if they were captivated by the whole scene. One of the Mirrator'd then gripped his energy sword and powered it to life as a last resort to stop the rabid grunt. The single blade cut through the darkness of the room and Palab screamed to his brother.

"Stop it!" Palab growled in his native tongue and the sound caught them all off guard. None of the elites understood what he had said but they certainly acknowledged it. Etah stopped struggling and slowly began to calm himself; the elite powered down his blade. Palab walked over to his brother and helped him to his feet. Palab could see that the elites were doing everything within their power to stop Etah; they had broken his right arm. "Are you ok?"

"I thought he would hurt you." Etah replied in their native tongue. He grabbed his arm and finally showed a sign that it was hurting him; a single tear of pain bubbled in his eyes. Palab then looked to the Captain, the elder and Simyaldee and to his surprise they were all standing; each gripping the hilt of their energy swords and glaring at them with terrified expressions.

"Scared?" Palab asked the group, speaking in covenant tongue. "Now you see how we feel, but you can kill grunt at will, we no kill you or all grunts suffer. You no like us, and you all use us till now, you scared me take grunts away. We leave, and brutes kill you all. Me answer question, captain, if me leader or warrior? Me neither; me Grunt!" Palab helped Etah, and they both walked to the door. Balmaeda opened it for them. He looked to Palab with a sense of shame. He felt bad for what the captain had done. Clearly the Captain was showing Palab how he felt, and how most elites felt; that a grunt deserved no respect.

"May I be of assistance, Sergeant?" Balmaeda questioned, so that only Palab would hear, leaning down to the grunts level.

"No. We not need you help." Palab replied softly. "But let know what Captain and Council do next." Palab and Etah walked from the room. Balmaeda simply smirked and nodded his head; closing the door behind the two grunts. His attention then turned back to the Captain and the Elder, whom were still shocked. They watched as the two grunts left the Captain's room and finally breathed easy.

"Do you feel that, Captain?" Simyaldee questioned. "That is fear. That sound you heard was nothing compared to his battle cry. Even though that was the second time I've heard it, it's still a horrific sound. His voice demands respect, as if a great beast was boiling within him."

"I agree, Simyaldee." The Captain replied. "I don't believe I will

tempt the Sergeant in such a way in the future. He did well in controlling himself, but if there were other grunts here, he may not have held back his aggression. We would be dead."

"Now you see, Captain." The elder spoke up; reattaching the hilt of his blade to his belt. "If we do not change our views of the grunts, the grunts will surely change it for us. We are not in the position to fight the Covenant and the grunts. We must work with them, or we will fall."

- - - - -

The battle within the Well of Forgotten Souls spilled into the streets of the Capital City of Jogrennilee. And the brutes were on the retreat. Covenant capital ships were exploding left and right along the landing fields of the City, but some managed to take off. Plasma bursts fired from the weapons along the ship's sides, firing completely at random at various towers and transports.

Word had spread quickly that the brutes had entered the Council Chambers and that blood had been shed. There was no longer any denying that a division had occurred. War had come to the elite home world. Orbital destroyers descended through the clouds towards numerous elite cities and began firing without warning. The elites amassed their armies quickly in retaliation but the prophets were swift.

In orbit, the elites quickly received their commands from the surviving council members, and began to oppose the brutes that shared their ships. Brutes attempted to take over and the battle escalated. Ships exploded as they began ship to ship battles. And soon, transmissions had spread throughout covenant controlled space. Every remaining ship within the Covenant sector rallied to the elite home world; brutes and elites alike. The brutes wanted to finally be rid of the elites, and elites fought for their survival against the brutes, jackals, and drones. Slip Space battles began as ships literally ran into each other as they were headed to the elite home world. Sub space explosions ruptured into normal space and only debris could be seen. The Covenant wanted to maintain control over the inner worlds of the Covenant Empire, but the inner worlds of the Covenant Empire was based primarily within elite controlled space.

The High Council warriors within the council chambers were finally able to hold off the brute aggression. But the prophets escaped to their ships and fled. The streets were still taming with large numbers of the brute aggressors, and the Councilmen and Mirratord warriors went out to face them.

"Elder." An Elite Mirratord soldier stated as the group neared the exit. "You should all remain here, and get to the lower rooms. Brute ships will surely target the council chambers from orbit."

Wounded and exhausted the elite baring the scar on his head, the high elder of the elite council, stepped forward. "We will not hide from those cowards." He talked slowly, gasping for breath. His age was catching up to him and his stamina was not what it once was. "We may be older, but we can still fight." The elder council members that were still alive agreed with a combined roar. "Our task now is to protect our world first, and our safety will come at a later

time."

"Very well, elders." The young Mirratord warrior replied. "What is our next action?"

"Under all battle conditions, the females are to report to the Inner Sanctum with our young. They are our future, so we shall venture there and be sure that our future is well protected. Then we shall radio for assistance from the grunt and hunter home worlds. The elite outposts there must be notified at once." The proud warrior slowly fell to a knee, grasping his side.

"Elder!" The young Elite stated as he quickly jogged to his side. "Your wound needs attention." The other members of the council quickly came to his aid.

"There is no time to hover over the wounded!" The high elder shouted. "I will catch up if I can, but you all must go! Our world is under siege! GO!" The elder commanded. He winced in pain as he pushed the younger Mirratord elite away.

"He is correct." Another councilor declared. "Let us go." The group of Mirratord warriors and the council members burst through the door. Before them lay the bodies of elites, brutes and jackals, but the battle in Jogrennilee was not over. The roar of wraiths and hiss of specters could be heard everywhere. Soon a Phantom descended and several red armored elites sprang from its gravity lift. The council members boarded and made their way to the Inner Sanctum of the elite home world.

The elder elite slowly stood to his feet and forced his way through the door of the Council Chambers. For generations the Well of Honored Souls had been a symbol of the elites bond with the Covenant, and now it was nothing more than a lie. Everything it represented had been thrown away. His eyes filled with the tears of the innocent that lay dead before. The brutes and jackals didn't distinguish between the elite young and the females; all were worthy prey.

"What have I brought upon us all? Could I not have found a better way to end our dispute?" The high elder felt the weight of all the deaths that lay before him as if they were his fault. Had he not been so aggressive toward the prophets, had he been more discreet with his anger, the battle may not have happened. The council chamber was not built inside or near a military facility, and the surrounding developments were bustling with the daily activities of the females and young. The lives of the innocent in the area would not have been avoided. He hadn't realized the casualty of what would happen if he drew his sword and opposed the prophets.

A scream caught the elders ears; the scream of a female. It was nearby and he had to find her. He shrugged off his pain and ran in the direction of the scream. He turned the corner and spotted two brutes chasing a female and her young. The young male was a strong runner but he wouldn't leave his mother behind. He found himself constantly stopping to wait for her.

The high elder screamed to them, "Here! Bring the beasts to me!" The young male spotted the elder and a smile sparkled across his face. He instantly recognized the elder, especially by the scar upon his

forehead.

"High Elder Barremmee!" He shouted. He turned to his mother and waved her toward him, but he could see that the Brutes were catching up to her. The young child knew his mother wasn't going to make it, and his warrior instincts took over. Elder Barremmee had to run towards them, but the pain in his side could no longer be ignored. His side cramped, his muscles tightened and he collapsed. He gazed up and glared at the young elite as he charged the two brutes to give his mother more time to escape. It was a futile effort and the brutes merely toyed with him. The female stopped and wanted to run to her child's aid, but elder Barremmee was close enough to stop her.

He stepped in front of the female, inhaled, and dashed toward the two Brutes. The pain in his side became excruciating and his vision began to darken, but he pushed himself harder; hoping to save the young elite. The two brutes saw him coming and one of them held the young elite male in his massive hands. The young elite roared as he tried to free himself but the brute effortlessly snapped the young elite's neck. Barremmee roared at the sight and charged the two brutes in a blind rage, but in his weakened condition he couldn't focus. His vision blurred; too much blood lost. His energy sword grew heavy and then all he felt was a massive pressure in his chest. A burning sensation swelled over his body; he realized that he was being hit by plasma fire. His shields were fading fast.

With his last bit of energy he lunged towards the two brutes and shouted back to the female, "Run!" No more words could escape from his mouth as he landed on one of the brutes. He could no longer feel the weight of his plasma sword or the pain in his side, only the cold steel of a brute shot's blade sliding through his chest.

- - - - -

\_The Knight and Piercing Arrow\_ quickly but quietly sped through Slip Space, deep within covenant controlled space. The communications officer was boringly listening to chatter across the covenant frequencies; listening quietly for any sign that the covenant ships were suspicious of there lone ship. But he overheard something that struck his attention.

"Captain, please pick up frequency 117.83 on the covenant band." The com officer reported to the Ship Master's quarters. The captain had long ago dismissed the Mirrator and the council members, and he was quietly resting.

"What is it?" Timnaldee questioned as has climbed from his pallet and crossed the room.

"Something you should hear." Timnaldee typed in the frequency and brutes could be heard over the channel.

"\_Curse those elites, they nearly killed the Prophets. Gather all ships and get us to the elite world, now! What? There are more elite ships in the area? Very well, return fire, destroy them all. The elite's world is as good as dead with or without us, our brothers can deal with them ..." \_

The channel died and the com officer reported, "Forgive me captain, I had to close the frequency. Someone was monitoring, and I didn't want



them to track us. What should we do?" The captain was speechless as he contemplated all of his options. The war had reached Dorenth much faster than any of them had thought. What could he do with a crew of only eighty warriors?

"Captain we're receiving a wide band transmission across the Covenant channels." The Com officer added. "It's marked for all Ship Masters. It's coming fromâ€¦ by the Gods, It's coming from Jogrennilee." The captain paused in mid thought.

"Patch me in." Timnaldee ordered.

"This is Councilor Vornaldea to all elite ships and colonies. The Prophets have betrayed our Covenant and have turned the brutes, drones and, jackals against us. Be warned, our homeland is overrun with the traitors. We are at war within the heart of our own home and it appears that the prophets knew this day would come. The brutes and jackals are everywhere, as are the drones. But we are not defenseless. We shall hold our ground and free our home land from these aggressors. All ships, form a defensive grid around our planet, and let none of the Covenant ships near our worldâ€¦"

The transmission was abrupt and the captain quickly cut in, "What happened?"

"Transmission terminated at the source, Captain." The com officer stated with a heavy rage in his voice. The captain could feel his pain, it was the same pain he himself was feeling, but he new what must be done. The news of war on their home planet was making all of them anxious to get there, and it seemed that they were going fast enough.

Timnaldee walked the short distance to the bridge and climbed to the top of the command pedestal, "Helm, maintain course and double our speed."

"Maintaining course, captain. Speed increased to secondary threshold." The helmsman calmly added. The Captain stood on the center pedestal and looked down to his crew. They were brave, strong and proud. And despite their actions in the past few minutes, he was even more grateful for them. They had maintained their composure, and didn't allow for the news to shake their foundation. His crew had reacted just as he hope they would. He was proud of them all.

"Com, be alert. Our speed after that transmission will surely attract any brute ships in the area. Any ship that comes within sensor range will be considered a threat." The majority of the Covenant fleet was in orbit around the Human's discovered home world, how could they have known that the prophets still had so many remaining resources. Time was now very crucial.

- - - - -

Palab waddled down the hall and into the grunt barracks. Inside the large cavern like room were forty of his kin and rows of methane tanks. Palab checked his gauges and decided that now was the best time to change his tank. He disconnected the main tank and pulled it out of his armor. His bridge tank could hold up to two minutes of methane, giving him plenty of time to change it. He grabbed a full tank and slid it into his armor. There was a loud hiss and then

silence as the gauge went up to full.

Most of the grunts were sleeping and he didn't want to disturb him, so he quietly looked over the room for his team. He then spotted them toward the rear of the room. He walked up to them and sat beside Etah as he was telling the team how he broke his arm. Etah was wearing a strange blue wrap around his arm which aided in the recovery time, and hummed lightly. It also helped deal with the pain.

"Me took on two elites." Etah said in covenant speak as opposed to the loud barks of his own language, because he didn't want to wake the others. "Me almost win, but Palab told elites to stop. He know me hurt them." The group chuckled softly.

"Then how you break arm?" Another of the team questioned.

"Me... uhh, me fall down, after fight." Etah laughed.

"You big liar, Etah." Another grunt laughed. "Etah runaway, hit wall. That how he break arm." The group laughed softly, so they wouldn't wake the other.

"Me not scared, me not lie. You talk all you want, me know what happen. Palab, he see it too, he know."

"Yeah yeah yeah, don't get your pack brother to help you." Another of the grunts added, snickering his words under his methane mask. "You were scared of elites."

"At least elites respect us now." Another member of the team added. "They not think we just grunts anymore, cause of Palab." The group all began to snort and sniff their approvals. "He Messiah. He make things better for all grunts."

"Yeah, elites scared of Palab." Etah stated. "We fight for Palab. We fight cause he leader. He little brother, but he important. Me fight anyone that bothers him."

For the first time, Palab let the words in. He didn't ignore them, or reject them, he simply let it happen. He was beginning to understand now. He was their leader, and the grunts would follow him even if he didn't order them to. This was what it meant to be the leader of the grunts, and it wasn't too bad. His team wasn't treating him any different then they normally did, but it felt as though they were feeding off of his strength. Palab knew that soon they would be arriving at the elite home world, and things would become different. He would have to lead all of the grunts and possibly prove his strength to them, but that there was no need to worry about that now. Palab lowered his head into his lap and quietly drifted off to sleep as the rest of his team of eleven grunts jostled and joked around. For now, Palab was at peace.

## 9. The Battle for Jogrennilee

**\*\*The battle for Jogrennilee\*\***

The Knight and Piercing Arrow exited slip space, tearing through the fabric of time and gravity. The distortion of transferring from one plane of existence to another quickly faded, and the ship was

once again whole. In the distance sat a large planetoid with a ring filled with dust and collected particles; it was a beautiful display. The large red planet was uninhabitable, but its massive size created an unusual gravity field throughout the system, and the ship's crew quickly began to adjust the ship's flight setting accordingly.

"Captain, settings have been adjusted to the gravity of the red giant." The navigator explained. "We can now enter the system. ETA to Dorenth is one hour."

"Good. Helm, proceed at best possible speed." The helm officer nodded and the \_Knight and Piercing Arrow\_ sped through the system.

"Sergeant Palab." The captain stated over the com. Palab didn't reply immediately, he merely sighed and casually pressed the com button on the wall.

"Yesâ€¦ Captain?" Palab questioned with a heavy head. He didn't want to talk to the captain at that moment. His dreams were still calling to him, his dreams of all his fallen kin in the war. He finally had the moment to think of them, but the demands of the Elites once again prevented him from mourning.

"I thought you and your Grunts would like to know that we are on final approach to elite space." The captain stated through the com. "We can not stop now, but if you fathom to gaze upon the giant red world, you will see your home."

"Thank you, captain." Palab replied. Palab pressed a series of buttons on the holo-panel near the door and a large screen appeared. He then switched the camera angle and a massive hologram of the red giant appeared. Its moons began to expand on the screens but soon one moon began to come into focus as the ship came closer and closer. Soon the red giant could no longer be seen in its entirety, it only appeared as a background. But the moons exploded into view, and one green moon sat in the center; home. The mumbling behind Palab was slowly escalating into a roar of barks and howls. The grunts were filled with joy unlike anything they had ever felt. It was an exciting day for them and mixed emotions filled their grunt speak.

"You did it, Palab!" Etah barked loudly over the cheers erupting from the mass of grunts staring at the screen. "You brought us home!" Cheers carried throughout the crowd and some of the older grunts even became emotional; sobbing at the image of the home they had never seen but dreamed of every night. They knew that they wouldn't stop at their home planet, but for them to even see it, to be this close to it was worth the excitement. But something caught Palab's ear, and it grew louder and louder with every second; it was the captain's voice. Palab walked out of the room, leaving the grunts to celebrate and once the door closed behind him he could no longer hear the grunts cheers.

Palab walked to a nearby communications terminal and pressed the Bridge channel; "Sergeant Palab reporting."

"Finally. I need you on the command deck. There is somethingâ€¦ not right."

"I'm coming." Palab closed the channel and walked back into the room with his grunts. He pulled Etah to the side and softly spoke. "I'll be back. They need me on the command deck."

"I'll come with you." But Palab shook his head in protest. "But you know what happened last time. They don't like us, if anything happens to youâ€|"

"Don't worry Etah, I'll be fine. Besides, with only one arm, what can you do to help if trouble starts?" Palab laughed. "No, you stay here. I'm leaving you in command until I get back." Palab turned and left his happy grunts. Etah watched as the door closed behind his younger brother and he couldn't escape the feeling that something wasn't right.

- - - - -

The door opened and Palab strutted on board the command deck. He quietly waited at the door but no one seemed to acknowledge his presence, he wasn't surprised by that but what did surprise him was the amount of tension the elites seemed to be under. As he crossed the threshold of the command deck doors, Balmaeda spotted him and trotted to his side.

"Balmaeda, what wrong?" Palab asked as the elite approached.

"There is no contact from your home world."

"Elites have bases on grunt world?" Palab questioned. He wasn't surprised about it but still he wanted to know everything.

"Yes sir. Your world is one of our training stations for the young to prove themselves before being enlisted into the ranks of warriors. It is here that our young Watchmen journey too after they have completed their trials. But we have not been able to contact anyone. The station here is a relay point to our home world. By contacting them, they will inform Dorenth of our approach."

"â€|I repeat. To all elite stations, this is the \_Knight and Piercing Arrow\_, under leadership and guidance of the Arbiter." The com officer shook his head and sighed heavily. "Captain, there's nothing. Not even a transmission echo. It's as if everyone left."

"Did the brutes attack?"

"No signs of space battles, captain. The space stations appear to be intact, and no battle markings are visible."

The captain pondered what course of action to take. If they approached Dorenth without clearance then the stations in orbit of the Grunt World would surely turn on them and fire. But if the stations were empty, then the path would be clear.

"Your orders, captain?" The helmsman questioned.

The captain sighed. "Raise shields but power down weapons. If those stations do turn on us, we have little chance of fighting back." \_The Knight and Piercing Arrow\_ exited the gravity well of the massive red world, leaving the grunt planet behind.

"No response from the battle stations, captain." The com officer replied. "As we thought, they're empty."

"We should still be in range to remotely access the stations systems." Timnaldee nodded toward his system operator.

"Coming online now captain. Your orders?"

"Find out how long these stations have been abandoned."

"The last ship left orbit nearly five hours ago. Carrying a full complement of elites, hunters and—" The system operator paused; confused at what he was reading. "Sir, they've taken all the grunts."

"What do you mean?" The captain questioned.

"I was not sure at first, but I cross referenced with the type of ships that have landed here, and at other stations around the planet. There have been over two billion grunt entries into the database in the past few hours. The system is still trying to catch up. Hundreds of ships have landed in the past few hours and loaded beyond complement; filled with grunts."

"Elites take grunts from our home to fight their war." Palab mumbled from the back of the command deck. The captain quickly turned and spotted the little grunt standing near the door. He had almost forgotten that he had called him to the command deck.

"I know this troubles you, Sergeant, but you must understand—" The captain began to state, but Palab quickly cut across his words.

"Me not troubled. Me know what means to be grunt. Elites not ask for allegiance of home grunts, these grunts go where told to go, they not know things change." Palab lowered his head but quickly looked to the captain. "Your orders?"

The captain could only look to Palab, but he then stated, "We will arrive in our home world in one hour. Prepare your troops for anything that may occur. The brute are attacking our home, and we will arrive in the heat of combat."

"Yes Captain." Palab quickly raced off the bridge and contacted his grunts via the ship com systems.

The Knight and Piercing Arrow accelerated away from the Grunt world, leaving it behind. Palab knew that one day he would bring the grunts back to their methane rich world, and they would return to their normal way of life.

- - - - -

"We should go." The female voice stated from behind the shielded mask of her MJOLNIR Mark V body armor. The tiny ship shifted from the dark corner of the space station and slowly arced away. "That was a big ship. Glad they didn't see us."

"I think that carrier has more to be concerned with than one tiny ship." A middle aged woman stated as she tied up her long

silver-streaked hair. She shifted her glasses back onto her face and looked over the covenant data that the Spartan had just retrieved. "It was fortunate that the elites and grunts left when they did, I was assuming they would have left a long time ago. But I guess I overestimated the elites trust in the Prophets."

"Getting the data was easy enough, but had I been a few minutes longer, they might have sensed the activity on the station." The female Spartan added. "Luckily, they didn't even take the time to run a scan."

"They wouldn't have detected us anyway." The older woman replied. "I marked us with a Covenant band a long time ago. Besides, I don't think the elites are truly aware of what they have stumbled upon. The prophets on the other hand, they know everything."

"But why did we come to the grunts home world? We didn't even go to the surface."

"The forerunners left something, something unique to each species they left behind." The woman opened a canister and poured a brown mixture into a small cup. She then pulled out a thermos from a nearby storage locker. Steam rose off of the hot water as she added it to the brown grains. She then began to mumble to herself; "The prophets built that space station in orbit so that they didn't need to deal with the Methane world belowâ€¦ The grunt's wailâ€¦ that battle cry they do. That might be their key."

The Spartan watched as the doctor mixed the water and grains. "You know, you've had too much caffeine in the past few days, Doctor. You haven't had proper nutrition in nearly a week, and that isn't good for someone of your age."

Doctor Halsey ignored the Spartan's concern, "The grunts, the elites, the jackals, the brutes, those drones, which I have yet to see, and we humans, all share something unique and each has a key to the puzzle." The elderly doctor stated. She took another sip of her coffee and then rubbed her head. The taste was horrible and the coffee grains were annoying her, but she ran out of filters days ago. She was seriously debating on venturing to UNSC space just to get some fresh coffee filters, but there was no time for that. The last transmission she intercepted stated that Earth was under full assault.

"What about the hunters?" The Spartan questioned, knowing that the Doctor would answer such a direct question.

"The Hunters are immune, meaning they weren't a factor when the Forerunners began their research. Kelly, power up the engines, set slip space coordinates for the next world on the chart. The prophets have data stored there as well. After that, we should be able to solve this puzzle, just as the prophets did."

Kelly took off her helmet, because she had become accustomed to not wearing it around Doctor Halsey, and sat it to the side. They had been traveling for nearly a month and had done several random trips to covenant worlds. Luckily, the war had distracted the Covenant and they left several outposts undermanned, making it easy for a Spartan to break in, get data, and get out; virtually unnoticed.

Kelly looked at Doctor Halsey and stated, "Ma'am, when are you going to tell me what all this is for, why are we out here?" Kelly typed in the preset coordinates and the slip space drive came alive. The engines began to hum and Doctor Halsey looked at Kelly with a soft smile.

"Like I told you; we're going to save us all." The tiny ship darted into a slip space tare and vanished from site.

- - - - -

Dorenth  
> Elite Capital City of Jogrennilee<p>

Two days had passed since the assault began, and the battle still raged over head. The Elite home world was a brilliance of fire and destruction, but that didn't stop the bombardments from orbit. Some of the Covenant capital ships had slipped passed the elite's defensive battle group in orbit. Then made there way from city to city; the brutes destroyed anything in view with their ship-side plasma cannons. The city defense systems were able to hold the some of the brute ships off, but patience and determination eventually gave the brutes the advantage, and not even the massive ground based plasma cannons could hold off the Capital ship's onslaught from above. The same scene took place all across the elite home world, as city after city fell to the brutes advance.

In the Capital City of Jogrennilee, the elites were able to form a stronghold. They had assembled most of the ground forces into the city. The grunts that had been transported from their home world were quickly dispersed across the world, but Jogrennilee was where the largest segment was deployed.

Deep within Jogrennilee stood several crumbling towers, the result of an early Capital Ship barrage, and the entrance to an underground tram system that connected all the cities to the Elite Inner Sanctum. This system of tram tunnels connected all around the world. At this entrance the elites held one of their last outposts for connecting to the outside world. The surviving High Council members, the Mirrator warriors, hundreds of hunter pairs and thousands of grunts patrolled the region. Numerous phantoms patrolled the sky as well as hundreds of plasma cannons along the ground. The elites had been pushed back, and they could not retreat any further without jeopardizing the safety of the civilians within the Inner Sanctum.

Elder Vornaldea patrolled the tram deck and waited for word from the strike teams that had been deployed to other cities. His arms folded across his chest and his robe trailed behind him as he paced back and forth. He had taken a large risk ordering the orbital defense ships to not pursue the Covenant ships that had broken through, but the main thing his elites had to do was hold the orbital defensive grid; he would let his ground forces worry about the few ships that got through.

An elite wearing yellow armor approached. "Elder. We just received word from the Balamenan City Tram system. Our strike team loaded up the last few civilians into the tram and they were sent to the Inner Sanctum. The tunnel was destroyed and collapsed behind them. The troops are pulling out and are heading back here."

"Excellent, Captain. That confirms all eleven Tram Terminals, excluding those the brutes destroyed for us. This is now the only clear path to the Inner Sanctum."

"Elder if I may have a word with you." The Captain stated with respect. "But is this wise? The Brutes are aware that we are gathering our troops here, and if they break through our orbital battle defensesâ€¦"

"Then we will be wiped out. But our tram tunnel will also be destroyed and our families will be safe. There are enough supplies for the elite race to thrive for decades; undisturbed within the Inner Sanctum." Vornaldea knew that he had signed their death warrant within the city, but if it meant that the women and children would survive, then it would be worth it. But he knew the brutes better than that. The prophets may have wanted an easy victory, but the brutes would not be happy unless they got their hands bloody. He knew they would not want to bombard the last elite city from orbit. No, they would come, and they would want to face the elites in battle. "But do not threat, Captain. We have amassed a rather large array of ground based plasma cannons. It would take a dozen ships to break through our arsenal." Soon a nearby grunt ran toward the councilor as if to test his theory.

"Orbital defense failing!" The grunt screamed. "Brutes getting through, they come here!" The grunt was hysterical with fear; flailing his arms and painting heavily. "Two hundred ships come here, elder!" For all his panicking ways, Vornaldea understood his crazed disposition. Even with the full assault of hunters, grunts and his brothers, this was a battle for survival. The brutes were coming to exterminate them, and they wanted to get through to the Inner Sanctum. There would be no hope for the women, the young and the frail. The brutes needed to be stopped. Vornaldea looked around and noticed the concern on all the faces of the elites around him. They were a mixed group of Rangers, Captains, Mirratord, and councilors; his command team.

"Maintain discipline, all of you." Vornaldea stated. "We can not fret before the battle has begun. Begin positioning battalions along the cities edge; ten hunters per battalion. The rest of the troops will be dispersed throughout the city. Position the Tram 2 kilometers into the tunnel and prime the chargesâ€¦ as a last resort we'll blow the tunnel ourselves. Charge all cannons and fire at will; let the beasts know that we will not go down without a fight." His command team divided and headed to their posts, leaving only the Mirratord, the Council and hundreds of grunts at the Tram Station.

Vornaldea looked to the sky as the sun began to set. He, as well as every elite in the City of Jogrennilee, knew that this was their last stand. No matter what, the brutes would not pass this position. He would sooner die then let that happen.

"Grunt, get on the communications array, radio for any surviving troops across the world to rally at Jogrennilee." Vornaldea stated slowly, but sternly, to the grunt. "If the Brutes are coming, then they will face us all."

"Yes, elder." The grunt waddled to the com and began sending transmissions across the world, but questions kept crossing his mind. "We are not outnumbered, but the elites seem worried. Why? There are



millions of us grunts left since the first days of battle, and soon all will be coming to this city. We will outnumber the brutes by ten-fold, but the elites seem to think this is the end. Even the hunters seem confident."

"Have you sent the transmission?" Vornaldea questioned. He hovered over the Grunt and hung his head low.

"Yes, elder." The grunt replied, snapping out of his deep thought. He then looked to Vornaldea and noticed that the elder elite carried the face of a beaten enemy. "Why worried? Brutes outnumbered, we have many troops."

"Don't speak to me of what you don't understand, grunt." The grunt quickly became nervous, and trembled at the elder's aggressive tone. "We have the numbers, but we lack the power. The hunters will be helpful, but I'm sure the Brutes will simply bombard the outer areas of the city, too ensure that the tram is unharmed. They want our blood and will do whatever is necessary to kill us all."

"Bu... but what about grunts? We fight in large numbers." The grunt added from his cowering position. Vornaldea simply smirked, an almost chuckle escaped through his mandibles, and he walked away.

One by one the Covenant ships descended into orbit as they demolished the elite battle ships that were defending the city. They began to take position around the Capital city and were fired upon by the city plasma cannon defenses. Two hundred brute ships began surrounding the city's perimeter and returned fire at the outer rim of the City. Buildings crumbled from the force of the Capital Ships fire power, and some of the Capital ships also shot down by the ground based plasma cannons. With every capital ship that exploded, a roar of approval bellowed from the Elite warriors within the City. But soon the covenant ships were below the trajectory range of the plasma cannons, and the cannons stopped firing. The ground battle was about to begin, but the elites suffered massive losses during the initial barrage.

Of the two hundred ships the surrounded the city, one hundred and ninety remained. The brutes attacked without delay. As soon as their ships were low enough to activate their gravity lifts, they quickly deployed hundreds of wraiths, ghosts, and specters. Drones darted into the twilight sky; like a swarm descending onto their prey. The front line of elites ordered their troops into position as the brute and jackall attack formations sped across the massive fields surrounding the city. Suddenly hundreds of plasma charges arced overhead toward the incoming brutes. The explosions were massive but not enough to deter the enraged aggressors. They returned fire.

Balls of plasma arced back and forth across the twilight sky as the drones soared high overhead. They soon descended into the front line of the elites and the blood brawl began. The covenant forces ceased fire and increased the pace toward the rim of the city. The first wave of brutes broke into the city with pure rage driven fury as they slammed themselves into the elites and hunters. Grunts were trampled as they tossed grenades into the mass of brutes and jackals. The specters and ghosts were met hard by waves of elite phantoms that seemed to dart the sky like birds. But wave after wave of brutes

seemed to overwhelm the elite forces; and before long, the outer rim of the city had fallen, and the elites were retreating to their secondary positions.

"Battle not go well." The communications grunt grumbled. "First wave of brutes breaking through, troops falling back to secondary lines. Scout reports brute phantoms launching from capital ships."

Vornaldea smirked at this news. "So, they are sending in reinforcements before they have established a solid footfall. Good. They will not expect the hunters in such large numbers. The hunters will slow them down." Vornaldea exhaled heavily knowing that this was a good sign. The Brutes were cluttered together and attacking in masses, which make easy pickings for the hunters massive beam cannons. Vornaldea stepped to the edge of the Tram platform and peered over the railing as the Tram began so quickly speed into the tunnel. If the City were to fall to the brutes then the tram tunnel would be sealed by his hands. He looked closely at the explosive's detonator which was sitting on the table at his side. It was primed and ready to fire. The detonator button had no protection and was extremely delicate; a strung gust of wind at the right angle would be enough to trip it. No matter the price, none of the brutes could be allowed within the tunnel, or near the Inner Sanctum.

- - - - -

In one section of the city, on the front line, the elite commander rallied his army of grunts and took shelter within the corridors and streets of the buildings that scattered the inner city. They had been pushed back too far. Their perimeter defenses were crushed by the brute's aggression, but the elites had one last trump card. The hunters stomped down the streets toward their assigned positions and each gurgled with anticipation. Hundreds of the massive creatures then dived into groups of ten and each walked toward their battalion. The battle was soon upon them, they could feel the intensity of the elites and the fear of the grunts. Nighttime had come and darkness consumed the region as the hunters marched forward. They stepped around, over and on some of the wounded grunts without remorse. They then created a barrier between the elites and the advancing brutes. Plasma fire began erupting from the dark alleyways and bounced off the hunters' armor and shields. All ten of them locked their shields together and made a massive wall of metal. The shields quickly became super heated from the plasma fire but the hunters showed no concern for the siring heat. They held their ground and chuckled at the brutes futile attempts.

"Grunts, fall back behind the Hunters." An elite commander screamed. "Hunters, fire at will!" The hunters roared an approval and raised their cannons. The eerie green glow consumed the dark alley and concentrated radiation flowed in a massive drove. Brutes roared in agony and jackals shrieked in fear. The elites could hear the confusion within the brute's ranks and several brutes screamed as they retreated. But there was nowhere to hide from the hunters' tenacious outpour of radiation. It tore through the walls of buildings and shattered glass. Smaller buildings imploded upon themselves from the heat, crushing dozens of brutes in its wake. For now, the tide had been turned in favor of the elites, and the same display of overwhelming power repeated itself all across the city.

The brutes wanted to pulverize the elites, beat them with their own hands, and simply out muscle them, but the elites proved to more resourceful. The brutes and jackals had been baited into charging blindly into the battle, and they paid dearly for it. The Covenant ground troops numbers had been cut drastically by the hunters on the second line of defense, and an all out retreat had been called. The brutes maintained control of the outer rim of the city, and held their ground.

The Covenant soon realized that Jogrennilee would not be taken by force; the elites had a strong foothold. The hunters were a problem that needed to be dealt with if the elites were going to be defeated. The Brutes needed another strategy and it came in the form of jackal scouts.

The brutes held their position throughout the night, and for the first time in two days, the elites on the second line of defense were able to relax. The grunts huddled together by the dozens and seemed content with sleeping regardless of what was going on around them. Rogue plasma bursts would catch their attention, but the elites and Hunters quickly dealt with any of the brute stragglers that got lost in the night.

It had become expected that a brute scout would wonder into the elite camps, confused and lost because of the city layout, and was quickly killed by either the captain or commanding officers in the camps. It was strange to see a brute suddenly turn a corner and roar with shock, but the grunts quickly adapted to the occasional happenings. They weren't concerned any more. To the grunts the battle was over and all they had to do was wait it out. Perhaps they would even be able to go back home. A nice thought, but highly unlikely. The elite home world was in ruin, and the grunts knew that if they survived the war, they would quickly be used to aid in rebuilding the elites' one time beautiful world.

The sun crept above the city skyline, warming the streets and signaling the start of a new day. The grunts ignored it, and continued their sleep and prayers for their fallen comrades. The hunters stretched and arched their backs, chattering amongst their pairs, while the elites patrolled the camps; always vigilant and ready for the next battle. But they had no way to prepare for what was to come.

A loud roar filled the camp and echoed off the building walls, followed by another, and another. The hunters were dropping to the ground quicker then their partners could scream in rage. Their massive frames tumbled to the ground lifelessly and thudded loudly. The grunts were startled by the loud thumping and when they saw the lifeless corpses of the hunters they quickly panicked. Hundreds of grunts began running in all directions, screeching and crying in terror. The elites couldn't calm them down, and gave up trying; they needed to find out what was happening.

"Enemies! You see?" A lone grunt pointed to the top of a building and tossed a grenade. The plasma grenade flared across the camp and landed near the top of a two story building. The sudden explosion then revealed the culprit. The elites roared in anger as they soon looked to the rooftops. Jackals, dozens of them littered the rooftops.

Throughout the Covenant the jackals were not considered great marksmen, but their patience and vision proved a powerful asset when the Covenant Particle Beam Rifle was finalized. The jackals were uncanny with the weapon, and could wait for hours for before they would take a shot. This battle had once again fallen into the hands of the brutes. Thousands of jackals had been deployed into the city and overnight they had dashed across the rooftops to take position over the elite camps. The sun was their signal to begin and their targets were the hunters and then the grunts; the brutes wanted the elites for themselves.

A few hunters were able to pull back but a large majority fell during the initial volley of sniper fire. The jackals were everywhere; in front and behind. The hunters couldn't defend their unguarded areas unless they backed into a wall. The concentrated beam of energy bounced off of the hunter's armor from all directions, and one by one a lucky shot would get through, killing the massive creature. There was no cover from this strategy, but only to retreat. But that was not an option because too much ground had already been lost. The elites tried to rally the grunts as best they could, if only for a distraction and to buy some time to give the hunters instructions, but all was lost. Slowly, the last of the hunters fell.

The brutes once again stormed the streets, firing their brute shots and tossing grenades into the elite camps. The jackals turned their attention to the grunts and began to make quick work of the small bipeds. They tried running, flailing their arms in retreat, but they were too slow to outrun the jackal's quick aim.

"Blasted brutes!" An elite commander shouted. "You cowards are no warriors, you would not face us with the hunters, and now you charge when they are dead! You shall face my blade!" But his words were cut short when a brute shot grenade exploded in his chest. His shields vaporized and overloaded from the blow, and his chest caved in from the blast. His head reared back and blood evacuated from his mouth. He was dead before he hit the ground.

"Fall back!" The words seemed to be repeated throughout the city as battalion after battalion of elites and grunts retreated from their posts. The attack lasted only a few minutes, but already the elites were forced back into the city yet again. Wraith tanks were not enough, and even the banshees were held at bay by the flock of drones overhead.

"Elder." The communications Grunts blurted quickly. "Elites retreat again, hunters dead all over city, second line failed. Brutes come here!" The hysteria in the grunt's voice did nothing to help Elder Vornaldea's mood.

He looked away from the grunt in protest. "Silence! Mirrorlord warriors, it is time." Vornaldea looked to his guards and nodded in approval. "Our last line of defense has fallen. Grunts man the turrets at the perimeter entrances. Snipers to the towers and ghosts begin patrolling. Get the phantoms into the air to cover the rooftops. Communications; signal a full retreat to all battalions. We will gather here, and make our last stand."

"Last stand, elder?" The grunt shuddered.

"We will show those brutes the true strength of our right hand. For the Honor of elites, and the glory of our race, we will not die like cowards. We will fight!" The Mirratord warriors, decorated highly in their black armor, roared in a massive cry for blood. They gripped their single bladed energy swords in each hand and growled in anticipation. The council members also pulled out their energy swords and waited for the battle to come.

Grunts scurried up and down the streets to the nearby turret guns as explosions grew louder and louder. The battle was coming, and the thumping of brute shot grenades channeled through the streets. Stray plasma blasts darted into the area and dead drones fell from the sky. The roar of grunts and elites began to pour into everyone's ears. It was coming closer and soon it would be right on top of them. The grunts charged the turret plasma cells but the soft hum was silenced by the increasing roar of brutes and elites. The turret gunners took aim at any nearby corner, anticipating any Brute that came into view, while the grunt beside him checked and double checked his needler. Elder Vornaldea and the High council were surrounded by fifteen warriors of the Mirratord and their blades hummed with readiness.

A sudden crash of glass caught everyone's attention, as an elite decorated in silver armor fell through a building window with a brute, struggling for dominance. The elite's energy sword pressed firmly against the blade of the brute shoot and the two fell to the ground; roaring at each other for blood. An explosion then ripped to the far side of the perimeter, as dozens of grunts ran from an alley followed by a wounded elite. The elite stopped and returned fire at the alley, shooting at a flock of shielded jackals. The grunts in his group stopped and returned fire. The turret gunner closest to the firefight quickly began firing into the alley. The jackals were caught of guard by the massive barrage of plasma and were mowed down. But more jackals quickly took their place. Drones began to pour over the rooftops and engaged the free standing grunts on the streets. Then came the brutes, and they seemed to come from every direction. More retreating grunts and elites, their numbers greatly reduced, ran into base camp and quickly took defensive positions.

Dozens of elite piloted phantoms roared overhead and began firing at the rooftops, killing off nearly all the sniping jackals, but those that survived found themselves on the ground running for cover as grunts swarmed on top of them. With the jackals dealt with the phantoms began to turn their attention toward the swarms of drones that swelled across the skies. The phantom pilots and their gunners made easy pickings of the flying insects.

The battle on the ground was at a fever pitch. Brutes darted into the open from all directions, and the elite Commanders and Rangers eagerly faced them. Hundreds of plasma bursts streaked in all directions. The brutes were pushing the elites back and the grunts were quickly running low on ammo. The smell of blood filled the air, and roars of all kind echoed throughout the remains of the city. Through the confusion of battle a small group of twenty brutes slipped passed the perimeter warriors and made their way toward the Tram Station.

"And now the battle comes to us." Vornaldea stated. "There is no longer time to wait. Let us spill the blood of these Brutes." The high council members powered their energy swords as the group of brutes made their way toward the tram station entrance. But the

Mirratord warriors blocked their path, preventing the councilors from attacking the brutes.

"Our future leaders need guidance, elders." A senior warrior of the Mirratord stated. The tram quickly sped into view, and two grunts exited the tram doors. Three of the Mirratord warriors quickly circled the elders and forced them into the tram. "We are your right hand, and we will see this battle to the end. But your place is with our hopeful future." The senior warrior and twelve of his team vanished as they activated their camouflage and ran toward the charging brutes.

"What is the meaning of this?" An elder stated.

"Our place is in this battle!" Screamed another.

"Elders, we go to inner sanctum." One of the grunts stated. He quickly leapt into the tram control seat and powered the engines. The Tram slowly raised above the track as its gravity thrusters powered.

"We can not leave our brothers! Not like this!" Vornaldea shrieked. His anger only boosted by the pain in his heart. His Mirratord warriors were doing as they were trained to do; protect the High Council at all cost. The last elder was forced onto the tram and the door closed behind him. The elders resisted but they were unable to fend against the strength of the youthful warriors.

"For the honor of the Mirratord!" One of the young elites stated to the elders. The Tram door closed and it quickly sped into the tunnel and vanished from sight. There was only one goal left for the young Mirratord warrior; seal the tunnel if the brutes came close to the tram tunnel.

The group of brutes made their way into the station and quickly spotted the lone Elite standing near the Tram tunnel. They all roared with anticipation, but that roar was short lived as energy blades began tearing at their fur and flesh. The brutes never saw where the attack was coming from. With the swiftness of a serpent and the skill of the best elite warriors, the Mirratord pounced onto the unsuspecting brutes. They were silent and quick, striking at the brute's vital areas, and killing them before they could scream. The twelve Mirratord warriors snorted at the ease of the victory and turned to the senior warrior. The senior looked up to the young elite guarding the tunnel entrance and nodded his head. The young elite understood that he was now on his own. He would be the last line of defense, and if the brutes broke through then the tunnel was to be destroyed.

The other Mirratord warriors then walked to the Tram exit and walked into the street with the rest of their kin. The battle had yet to let up. Brutes continued to pour from all sides as more elite battalions and squads made their way from the perimeter. The streets were flooded with enraged brutes, blood thirsty elites, frantic grunts, and trigger happy drones. The twelve Mirratord warriors all smirked at the carnage and powered their blades.

"Today brothers, we fight for us all." The senior warrior stated. With the grace of a master warrior he darted into the fray. His hooves covered nearly ten feet with each stride. He contemplated

turning on his active camouflage but decided against it; he wanted the brutes to see him, to see his face as his blades ripped across their hides. He rolled his twin blades so that each of the two single bladed plasma swords stretched the length of his forearms. He quickly spotted a pack of brutes slaughtering a few grunts, and made his way to their aid. He quickly charged passed them, slitting their throats in one swift move, but he didn't stop, he continued on until more brutes were in his view.

The brutes never knew what was about to hit them. The battlefield was filled with roars and explosions and it dulled out any warnings of what was about to happen to them. Before they could bring their guns to bear, they were impaled by the elite's swords. He retracted the blades and continued on, killing any brute that came near. The other Mirratord warriors also scattered amongst the chaotic battlefield, each killing two or three brutes at a time. The Mirratord warriors were truly the masters of this battlefield.

- - - - -

Inside the tram station, the lone young warrior paced in front of the tunnel. He wanted to be with his brothers fighting the brutes, not waiting for them to come. His eyes glanced at the detonator sitting upon the table. He didn't want to use it, but if necessary he would. The continuation of his race lay at the end of that tunnel, miles underground within the Inner Sanctum. He would fight and die to protect it. The lone grunt at his side quickly jumped with an excited cheer. The young elite had first thought that a brute may have slipped in, but he noticed that the grunt wasn't nervous; he was excited.

"Elite ship coming!" The grunt cried with a roar of excitement. "More support coming, enter orbit and coming to city! We're saved!"

The young elite thought quickly as to what he was talking about. "Explain yourself! What ship?"

"It ship from front line fleet. It is \_the Knight and Piercing Arrow\_." The elite knew the name well, because it was the command ship for the High Council, and that also meant that more of his brothers from the Mirratord were coming. But was one ship going to be enough to turn the tide of the battle.

- - - - -

A flash of light ripped in orbit of the elite home world and the elite carrier faded into view. The hum of the slip space engines slowly began to fade and the engines' of the \_Knight and Piercing Arrow\_ carried it into orbit. Dozens of smoldering ships hung in the atmosphere in a death grip. Wreckage bounced off the shields of the ship, and other elite ships continued to battle brute ships in orbit.

Captain Timnaldee gazed through the view screen at the smoldering ships that drifted in orbit. His command crew also stared in shock at what lay before them. The surface of the planet was glowing with red hot spots where the Brutes had barraged major cities from orbit. But there were still plenty of cities untouched, guaranteeing that there were survivors scattered across the world.

"Scan the wreckage of these ships and find as many survivors as we can." The Captain ordered. "Is there any response from the surface?"

"Yes captain." The com officer replied. "Jogrennilee seems to be the focal point of activity. I've made contact with a grunt at the command center. He's reporting in now." The com officer quickly began to transmit the grunts words over the command deck speakers.

"\_Brutes push elite forces back. Elites send High Council to Inner Sanctum. Big battle here. Not know how long we live."\_

"Is there anyone of command we can speak with?" The captain calmly spoke into the com.

"\_No, but young council guard here."\_ There was a soft shuffling sound and then the deep voice of a young male elite bellowed across the com.

"\_Captain, we are under heavy attack. We are outnumbered by brutes, but we have plenty of grunt support and they're numbers are thinning rapidly. We have other warriors scattered across the planet but they will not be able to reach, if they can come at all. The city defenses are all we have left. All tram stations have been shut down, but we are guarding this one, it is the last. I have my orders to destroy it if the brutes break through the tram stations defenses."\_ The young warrior inhaled and gave himself time to reflect, to make sure he didn't forget anything.

"Have the brutes conquered the High Council bodyguards?" Timnaldee inquired He dared not to say too much about the Mirratord to the young elite, and also to the listening ears of his command crew, but it was no longer a time to keep secrets.

The young elite warrior paused; he was unsure how to answer. He wasn't aware that the secrecy of the Mirratord had been reviled but there was no time to be second guessing. He cautiously replied.

"\_No sir, we are still here. My brothers have entered the battle, but I am the only one guarding the tram station."\_ The captain was quite shocked to hear that the elite he was speaking to was in fact a member a bodyguard of the High Council; a Mirratord.

"Very good, hold your position as long as possible, do what you have been ordered to do." The captain swiftly replied. "I'm sending more of your brothers to your aid, along with a team of Grunts. Sergeant Palab, and Lieutenant Simyaldee will arrive in your station shortly."

"\_Simyaldee?"\_ The young elite questioned. The name was legendary within the Mirratord ranks. They all knew him and respected him. Every new recruit was forced to learn the chain of command within the Mirratord, and meeting Simyaldee would mean meeting the Second in command of all the Mirratord warriors. "\_I will hold as long as I can."\_

The channel terminated and the captain looked to his left. "We'll deal with those brute ships on the outer rim of the city, you defend that station. We'll fly over the city and you'll drop from orbit, a



supply of Phantoms will follow you after you have disengaged from the ship. Any questions?" The captain's gaze locked onto Simyaldee and Palab, and they both looked eager to get underway.

"No sir!" The two stated in unison. They quickly turned and raced off the Command deck.

"Warriors assemble at the Orbital Insertion Pods, we will descend shortly." Lieutenant Simyaldee stated into his personal com. He ran at a full sprint, determined to get to the battle and aid his brothers as fast as possible. But he quickly realized that he needed to wait for Palab. He turned his head and noticed that Palab was at a full sprint behind him; keeping up with him stride-for-stride while on all fours. Simyaldee immediately noticed that Palab was a lot faster than any of the other grunts. He also overheard Palab barking into his com.

It was extremely convenient to be aboard ship. Ship wide systems made communications much more efficient, and Palab thought that perhaps if the personal communicators had worked on Delta Halo then his other brothers and Doz Yammaeda would all be alive. But he knew that he couldn't mourn them now.

"Etah, assemble the team at the Orbital Insertion Pods." Palab barked in the language of the grunts. "It will just be us dropping into the city; the Mirratord."

Etah's voice echoed back across the com. \_"Understood. We'll meet you there."\_

The Orbital Insertion Pod hanger, on the lower deck of \_the Knight and Piercing Arrow, \_ was deathly silent until the first of the elites and grunts entered the chamber. Pods began to crane toward the exit tubes as the room slowly came to life. Everything was computer operated and thankfully the only things that needed to be loaded were the weapons. The grunts quickly began packing grenades, needlers, and plasma pistols into their pods. Etah was eager to grab a few plasma cannons but he knew this was going to be close quarters combat, and the fire power would only cause trouble for any of his allies nearby. Sixteen elites and eleven Grunts filled the bay as the last of the Pods were placed into position by the massive overhanging cranes. Palab and Simyaldee quickly ran into the room and addressed the Mirratord warriors before them.

Simyaldee stepped forward, "brothers of the Mirratord. Those detestable brutes have attacked our homes, families, and threatened our lineage. We will not let them take our home from us. We may be one team, but we are Mirratord, the best of all elite warriors. And now it is time to end this siege of our home. Our objective is simple: control the tram station and give Sergeant Palab time to rally the grunts. We have the advantage in this battle. The brutes will never suspect the grunts to attack. Load up, and let us fly into the belly of combat. For the honor of the Mirratord!" Elite and grunt's dressed in the special operations colors, and bearing the purple bar of the Mirratord, roared their battle cry and stepped into the Orbital Insertion pods.

Etah quickly hopped into his pod and began the pre-drop check as Palab walked toward him.

"Etah, how's your arm?"

"It's fine. I ran on it earlier."

"Ok, but if you want to stay behind, then you should. I don't want you to get hurt because you're injured."

"I'm fine. I'm not going to let my Messiah, and little brother, go down to that battle without me." Etah laughed. "You're worried about nothing. We no die here!" Etah burst out into a loud laughter, catching everyone's attention.

"Yeah. We no die here!" Palab returned in covenant speak. He waddled to his nearby pod and began the pre-drop check. All his weapons were accounted for, safety systems were online, and thrusters checked at full. The door closed and several small holes opened on the inside of the pod. Palab closed his eyes and waited for the shock absorbent matter to fill the pod. The holes began to glow softly and a white haze began to fill the inner chamber of his pod. It made Palab feel a little nervous at first, but he knew that he wasn't alone, the other members of his team were doing the same thing, and that gave him a little peace. The matter quickly began to solidify into a soft gel that slowly began to rise up and over his head. It was a warm feeling and not as bad as he thought it would be. Grunts were not allowed to use the Orbital Insertion Pods, so he had no idea as to how it would work. The atmosphere reader on his armor showed that the room was filled with Oxygen, so even though the gel was thick, it was still breathable by the air breathers. Palab was grateful that he had his mask, because the idea of breathing the gel filled him with disgust; not to mention it would kill him.

"\_Warriors, drop will commence in ten seconds."\_ Simyaldee stated over the Pod's personal channels. "\_See you all on the ground."\_ Palab was then alarmed when he started to hear several voices over the transmitter channels.

"\_I can't wait to get into the battle!"\_ An unknown Mirrator warrior shouted from within his Pod. "\_I want a brute head as a trophy for my mate."\_ Palab then quickly realized that the com channels for the Pods were open and he could hear the rest of the squad.

"\_I agree Brother! We shall bask in their blood and do the old ritual of offering to our mates!"\_ Several Elites roared and laughed at the words, but Palab was more concerned with the drop.

Another elite loudly laughed over the channel, "\_I shall have several females dancing before me. It can be frustrating not having a mate, but it means I can have my way with as many females as I please."\_

"\_This battle will be glorious!"\_ The elites continued to chatter, and Palab realized that this was most likely how the Mirrator warriors prepared themselves for battle. Listening to the elites gave Palab a sense that he didn't expect; he wasn't afraid. Ten seconds had long passed and Palab suddenly became concerned. He hadn't felt anything from the pod. Had he been left behind?

"\_We are entering the atmosphere, warriors, be ready for anything!"\_ Simyaldee stated. Palab was confused, had they already dropped from the ship? His question was quickly answered as his senses started to

go crazy. He felt disoriented for a few seconds and couldn't tell if he was awake or asleep, standing or sitting, and his stomach quickly became unbalanced. It quickly dawned on him that the pressure in the pod had increased; the pod was beginning to reduce speed and brace for impact.

The gel was absorbing the shock of everything happening outside the pod. The eerie sensation passed and Palab regained control of his surroundings. The Pod shifted slightly and light began to flood the compartment. The gel quickly began to evaporate and Palab grabbed his needler. As the cushioning gel began to evaporate, the door to the pod parted and the thick mist of evaporating gel rolled from the interior of the pod. Palab leapt toward the light of the door and exited the Pod. The first thing he heard was an explosion and then red plasma scorches flashed across his head. Palab quickly took cover.

-----

**\*\*Authors notes:** Sorry for the length of this chapter. It was much longer, but during the edit I realized I needed to trim it down and make one last chapter to finish this book. The next chapter will conclude book 1\*\*.

## 10. The Wail of the Grunts

**\*\*The Wail of the Grunts\*\***

It was madness; brutes were roaring and elites were screaming in fury. Grunts were running wildly around looking for shelter, shooting at random and tossing grenades in all directions. Palab looked around the battle field and tried to gather his bearings. He looked around and tried to find more Insertion Pods from the \_Knight and Piercing Arrow\_ in order to find his team, but there was too much commotion and too much chaos. He could barely stand still long enough to look around, he couldn't worry about his team right now; he had to obey his orders. First he had to find the tram station and secure it.

Palab darted from his cover position at the first opportunity and began to run to higher ground, he had to locate the station. As he ran, a brute suddenly fell toward him and grabbed him by the shoulder. Palab wasted no time in pulling away from the brutes grip, and emptied a round of crystal shards into its chest. The brute barely had the time to scream as the crystals created a massive creator in its chest. Palab strapped the needler to his back and broke down to all fours. He turned and saw a sign written in two languages; covenant, and elite. It said 'Tram Station', and he quickly ran toward it. He darted under brutes, and around elites. Palab knew that his team had their orders and that they would meet him at the Station. He ignored everything around him, but he wanted to help the other grunts that were fighting around him, he knew that the base had to be secured. There was no point in fighting amidst the chaos if there was nothing to fight for.

- - - - -

Etah exited his Orbital Insertion Pod and noticed that he was cut off from the rest of the battle. Two other Pods hissed open near him and

the elites leapt from the thick mist inside. Their dual single blades roared in their hands and each of them gave a deep 'Wort' as they sniffed the blood in the air.

"These buildings have been toppled over." The elite shouted. "The Insertion Pod must have altered a landing zone for us. The rest of the team must have landed elsewhere."

The other elite quickly acknowledge the statement. "No matter brother, we shall find brutes to slay." Etah quickly looked the field over for any sign of other pods. His best guess was that all 29 pods landed in various positions. He wished his Personal Com worked, he desperately wanted to call Palab, to make sure his leader was ok.

"What say you brother?" The Mirrator Elite stated to Etah. Etah was stunned to hear the words, but then remembered that he too was a member of the Mirrator. Unlike the Elite's that struggled against him on the Command Deck of the Knight and Piercing Arrow, these warriors had seen him and his team fight; they recognized his talent. "Are you ready to avenge your kin in battle?" Etah's first thought was that he was teasing him, like most elites tend to do, but there was a serious tone in the elite's voice that gave his words merit.

"Me ready." Etah replied with an aggressive tone. "We get to base and defend, kill any brute in way."

"Alright then." The Elite roared. "Follow me. The Tram Station isn't far. I'm sure you can keep up with us, brother." The elites quickly began to run around the crumbled ruins of what was once a building, Etah strapped his Plasma Pistol to his armor and quickly fell in line behind them, running on all fours.

'Brother'. The elite had said it twice and it was still echoing in Etah's mind while the three of them quickly, but cautiously, made their way to the tram station. Things were different now, thanks to Palab; his little brother the Messiah and king of the Grunts. Etah grinned softly at the thought, but the sound of battle was growing louder and louder as the trio sprinted over bodies and rubble. Soon they could see the ocean of bodies ahead of them. Elites, brutes, drones and grunts were massed together in a free for all of carnage. Explosions and plasma bursts scattered in all directions.

"There, look to the large central building!" The lead elite pointed to Etah and the other Elite. "Weave through this battle and get to the Tram Station!" The roar of the battle was deafening, but it wasn't a concern, Etah knew his orders and he was going to follow them; Palab would be at the Tram Station and he had to get there and help his brother.

A plasma grenade exploded nearby and three elites in the battle were killed, sending their lifeless corpses toward the trio of Mirrator warriors.

"Our brothers!" The lead Mirrator elite shouted. He roared and charged the two brutes that had taken shelter behind a smoldering wraith tank. The brutes were watching the battle in front of them and were tossing grenades at elites that were trying to rally together. "Cowards! You hide and kill from a far!"

"We no time for this." Etah shouted. "Need to get to station. Follow orders!" It was far too late to stop the enraged elite. He had already darted through the crowd and was making a strategic assault on the cowardly brutes nesting behind the smoldering tank.

The other elite turned to Etah. "Look at this carnage and look at your fellow grunts. Tell me how this can not bring you anger? We will get to the station, but we will slay these brutes first. They have no honor for this battle." The elite followed his Mirratord brother into the fray. Etah watched as brutes slaughtered grunts by the masses, and despite his urge to find Palab, he quickly felt the need to fight. He dropped to all fours and darted into the battle behind the two blood thirsty elites.

- - - - -

Lieutenant Simyaldee exited his pod and glared at the brutes that stood before him. He had landed in the very thicket of the battle, and was surrounded by brutes. He stepped to the ground without any show of concern or fear, and extended his arms. In the Palm of his hands were his single energy blades. He squeezed the hilts and the blades roared to life, exploding with a blue hiss of forged energy. Simyaldee heard a deep roar and quickly recognized the voice of his Mirratord brother, Ladme Balmaeda. The two elites stood in almost the same battle stance with their arms extended, their blades in each hand, and their knees bent. They slowly backed up toward each other until they bumped. The only cover they had was the two Orbital Insertion Pods that sat up beside them. They were completely surrounded and there was no way to escape.

"Eleven of them, do you think they have any clue as to what is about to happen to them?" Balmaeda questioned.

"I seriously doubt it." Simyaldee replied. The Brutes began to raise their plasma rifles and needlers, as they practically began to drool with anticipation.

"Good." Balmaeda added. "I want the shock on their faces to be the last thing they see."

One of the brutes roared, "kill them!" A barrage of blue plasma and pink crystals streaked toward the two elites but were quickly absorbed by the elites' shields. The two elites stood motionless, letting the brutes hit them until their plasma rifles overheated and needlers were empty. The elite's shields finally failed just as the last crystal needle exploded. "What?" The brute roared. "Their shield should have failed!" The brutes struggled to reload and cool off their weapons but there wasn't enough time.

"Our turn." Simyaldee roared as he sprang forth. The two elites split up and vanished in front of the brutes' eyes, as they engaged their active camouflage. Streaks of blood soared through the air as one by one the brutes were sliced by swift unseen killers. In a final act of desperation, the brutes began firing in all directions hoping to kill the cloaked assassins, but no matter where they shot, they hit nothing. The brutes fell one by one until only a lone brute was left. The two elites appeared before the beast and gazed at him, as the blood of the dead brutes dripped from their armor.

"Howâ€¦" The Brute began to question but Balmaeda raised his blade into the Brutes chin. His eyes rolled down the length of the glowing blade and at the elites face.

Simyaldee stepped forward and began to gloat, "We are the Mirratord. We are the right hand of the High Council, and the best of the best. You stupid brutes never stood a chance!" Balmaeda then split the Brutes skull from front to back. The brute's lifeless husks crumbled to the ground and the elites ran toward the tram station.

- - - - -

The entrance to the Tram station was now guarded by dozens of elites that had survived the fray. Grunts waddled around the station checking to make sure that none of the brutes had made it inside, but none of them could escape the sound of the battle outside. The battle had been going on for what felt like hours and the brutes were still pushing the elites back, even with the aid of the Mirratord.

The young elite member of the Mirratord glimpsed over the crowd that had amassed inside the station, and he felt a sense of comfort knowing that he wasn't alone anymore. The warriors that had gathered inside the tram station were injured, or part of medical teams, but he was still happy to not be alone. His eyes quickly focused on the entrance as three brutes ran into the station. However, they were quickly put down by two Mirratord that had chased them inside. The two Mirratord warriors were elites that the young warrior had never met in person, but knew them none the less. He quickly addressed the Second with a nod and exhaled; thankful that a leader had returned.

The young warrior raced to meet the two blood soaked elites, "The Gods be praised. Lieutenant Simyaldee. You made it."

"This isn't how we had planned to induct you, young one." Simyaldee smirked. "But trial by fire is a trial none the less. You've done well."

"If you say so, sir." Simyaldee could tell that the burden he was left with had mentally drained the young one. The main entrance was once again active and the elites turned to see groups of Mirratord elites and grunts stumble inside, exhausted. Palab then ran into the station with two brutes in close pursuit, but he quickly stuck them both with grenades before any of the elites could tell what had happened. He walked up to Simyaldee and nodded respectfully.

"What situation?" Palab eagerly questioned. The young elite warrior was stunned to see the bar of the Mirratord upon the tiny grunts shoulder but after seeing and listening to Palab, he didn't second guess it. He was quickly impressed by the grunts aggression and grace on his feet. He moved unlike any grunt he had seen, and despite the battle outside, he didn't seem nervous at all.

Simyaldee returned the nod, "Sergeant, glad you made it. So far, we're alive. Balmaeda and I just arrived. Young one, my team will gather at the Tram Station entrance. I will recall the rest of the Mirratord that were stationed with you, and you will all guard this Tram Tunnel. If we fail then it is up to you to destroy the tunnel. Maintain your position." The young warrior exhaled as the stress of being the one to destroy the tunnel quickly began to recoup upon his

shoulders.

"Palab, where are the other members of your team?" Balmaeda questioned. Palab turned and looked to the battle beyond the tram station's entrance and prayed for one his teammates to run through the door; especially Etah.

"They come." Palab stated with heavy doubt. Palab had landed alone in the midst of all the fighting and barely made it through. If any of his other Grunts had the same scenario their chances were slim. Palab wanted to call out to his pack brother. He wanted to shout his name as loud as he could, but emptiness was beginning to swell within him. His last pack brother was out there somewhere, alive or dead. "Me know theyâ€¦ they will come."

The station door parted and a grunt fell in. "Palab!" The grunt shrieked in its native tongue. A nearby medical grunt quickly ran to the wounded grunt at the door as he fell to the ground. Palab dashed to the door as quickly as he could. He recognized the grunt as one of his team. Simyaldee and Balmaeda ran along side Palab and as they came closer they quickly noticed the severity of his injuries.

The Grunt's chest was exposed and his methane tank hissed from a leak. His face was covered in blood and his right arm was gone. It was obviously the result of a plasma grenade at close range, but unfortunately the grunt survived the explosion. The nearby grunt quickly began to aid his wounded kin, but he knew that there was little that could be done.

"Palabâ€¦ Etah and the othersâ€¦ " The grunt gargled as oxygen began to leak into his methane re-breather. "They're pinned downâ€¦ drones and brutes have them pinned. I got away, to get youâ€¦ they need you."

"Where?" Palab asked in his native tongue; his voice cracking with anger and sadness. "What's their position?" The grunt was slowly dieing but he managed to raise his hand and point in the general direction that he left Etah and the rest of the team. Palab looked up and saw the blue smoldering smoke of a plasma flame in the distance. He looked back to the grunt's lifeless body and lowered him softly to the ground.

"Young one, hold this station with your life!" Simyaldee shouted back to the young Mirrator warrior. "Palab, tell us what happened, no matter what, we're with you!" Palab snarled as two brutes stepped into his vision. His grunts were being killed in a war that was not theirs. They were dieing to fight for the elites, because that was all they knew how to do. His elbow spikes exploded outward and anger crept over him. His brother was out there, his kin were dieing, and now he was going to make it stop. With a harsh snarl Palab exploded through the door with a quick burst of speed. Balmaeda and Simyaldee eagerly followed; their energy swords hissing at their sides.

There was nearly two hundreds yards of fighting between Palab and his Brother, and anything that got in the trio's path was instantly mowed down. The two elites pulled up the rear; their energy swords quickly slicing, and stabbing any nearby brutes that hindered their progress. Palab led them; cutting and jumping at any brute, jackal or drone that came near. With every move he made, something died from the slash of his spikes. Palab was incredibly elusive. His explosive

jumps and rolls were acrobatic in quality, and with good reason.

Palab only had one advantage over the brutes; his quickness. If the brutes hit him or grabbed him then their strength would certainly be the end of him. He had to keep moving at all costs.

Palab stuck brutes with grenades with such speed and grace that it looked as though he hadn't done anything. Every few feet he would scoop up more grenades, but he never slowed down. A brute jumped into his path but Palab spun around in mid air; spinning his elbow claws and slashing the beast's throat. By the time the brute fell to the ground, gasping at its throat, Palab had already stuck two other brutes with plasma grenades. A brute shot grenade exploded nearby, knocking Palab off his feet, but he rolled with the pressure and kept running. He felt something moist on his back, and wondered if he had been wounded, but he didn't care, he pushed on. A stray plasma blast struck his shoulder, and it stung him for a second, but it wasn't severe; he had to keep moving.

Keeping closely behind Palab, Balmaeda spotted two weary Mirratord warriors; soaked in the blood of brutes and drones. They were exhausted and Balmaeda could tell that they had been swinging their blades for quite some time.

He shouted to them; "Fall back to the station, and regain your strength, brothers." The two elites nodded and raced back to the station. Balmaeda and Simyaldee pushed on with Palab in front.

Simyaldee, on the other hand, show no such concern for his kin. This was battle. This was war. This was his element. His swords cut through the air swiftly, killing anything they touched. Heads rolled behind him as he made his way through the crowd and behind Palab. His speed was remarkable and his determination was unrelenting. Anything that Palab didn't kill, Simyaldee made sure to see it dead. The Mirratord Second in command had to slow his pace or he would have passed Palab and not known where to go. However, the destination was not the goal for him, killing the enemy was. So many battles he had seen, so much death that he had long ago learned to tune out the cries of pain and suffering from his enemies, and even his Mirratord brothers. Death was a natural part of the battlefield and to survive it, Simyaldee learned to accept it.

As the trio came closer to the smoldering tank, they quickly looked over the area and saw the carnage. Several elites and Mirratord warriors were pinned in an alley. There were many different units of elites taking cover in the shadowy side alley, ranking from simple soldiers to rangers. The Mirratord warriors seemed to be the ones doing the most fighting. The other elites were clearly exhausted and wounded. The brutes pressed the small group defending the tram station with every thing they had, and the elites were slowly losing ground.

Palab led the group of a pile of smoldering ghosts and brute corpses. He glared ahead and saw several grunts cowering in a corner, just behind the demolished tank. Palab ran closer and spotted Etah out of the corner of his eye.

Etah wasn't hiding, he wasn't even taking cover. Palab's older



brother was standing side by side with three Mirratord elites and three other Mirratord grunts. The six of them were holding off wave after wave of brutes and drones. Etah was tossing plasma grenades with deadly marksmanship, sticking brutes that were more than twenty yards away. He held a brute plasma rifle in his free hand and was giving the brutes everything he had. The six Mirratord warriors had setup an extensive perimeter around an alley, behind the tank, and were holding the brutes off with plasma fire; loosing ground only when necessary. The grunts supplied the cover fire, and any brutes that came to close instantly meet the single blades of the three elites.

A sigh of relief crossed Palab's mind as he came closer to the battle and he quickly turned his attention toward the advancing brutes. The brutes never saw the three of them coming. Balmaeda worked his way from the rear, cutting the throats of unsuspecting brutes without hesitation. Simyaldee was more aggressive. The Second of the Mirratord roared and leapt into the midst of the beasts, catching them off guard. He planted his left hoof on the ground and never moved it. From that position, he began swinging his blades at anything nearby. He pivoted on his left, and changed his attack posture. The brutes couldn't get close enough to attack, and they couldn't get away fast enough to avoid the searing energy blades. By the time one brute would take aim at Simyaldee, Balmaeda would take them out with his speed and stealth. Palab raced to the front line, weaving between the confused brutes, and stood between his brothers of the Mirratord and the advancing brutes.

The brutes didn't know what was happening around them. An elite was coming up from behind, another was in the center of their ranks, and a lone grunt was snarling at them in the trench of the firefight. The Mirratord warriors sighed in relief at the sight of Palab and the two senior warriors of the Mirratord. Etah raced up beside his brother and glared at the brutes. The other Elites quickly began to assist, leaving the safety of the alley. The other non Mirratord in the alley gazed out at the spectacle. They didn't know what to make of the little grunt staring at the horde of brutes.

Palab dropped to all four and started to growl toward the brutes, but his pitch dropped and a massive base exploded from within his mask. Etah sided with his brother and their pitch began to sync. The brutes were stunned with disbelief at what they were hearing. Even the Mirratord warriors had to stare for a second, but their gaze quickly re-fixed on the Brutes. The other two grunts ran up to Palab side and joined in the growl, the sound became almost deafening, drowning out the sound of the battle around. Four grunts had stopped the advance of ten brutes. Simyaldee stabbed another brute, but noticed that a chill was running down his spine. He then awakened from his battle meditation and looked the brutes around him; all of which were gazing at the four grunts. Simyaldee looked to Balmaeda, and the two of them glared at each other in shock. The brutes were completely engulfed in the sound.

Soon everyone began to pause as the sound echoed off of the surrounding buildings. The brutes and elites that scattered the streets, slowly and cautiously, pulled away from each other and began looking around, trying to figure out where the sound was coming from. But it was the grunts that seemed to not mind the sound, it was quite the opposite.

Every grunt that heard the sound began snarling into the air, as if driven feverish by the sound. As the echo entered their ears, they began gazing into the air as if attempting to find the source. Through their methane masks, each of the grunts was struggling to match the sound and join in. The harmony continued to grow louder as grunts fell into the pattern of the wail, but this was not a peaceful song being sung, this was a blood curling roar that every grunt was yelling, and the brutes felt a fear begin to consume them. The elites were also shocked and nervous as they watched grunt after grunt toss aside their fear. But even while the brutes seemed to tremble, the elites seemed to not be affected. It became more evident as the elites looked to the tiny grunts at their sides. What was striking fear into the hearts of the brutes, were the grunts' eyes.

As they roared, each of the grunts stared deep into the eyes of the brutes. Every eye gazed at them, and consumed them with intimidation. Several of the brutes roared back and tried to frighten a nearby grunt, but the aggressive behavior only seemed to enrage the grunts more. Where a brute would roar at one grunt, four or five grunts would snap back; glaring with soul crushing stare.

Simyaldee stepped close to Balmaeda, "the Wail of the Grunts."

Balmaeda looked at him with a confused expression. "But it is merely a legend."

"I think not, my brother." Simyaldee watched as several brutes tossed their weapons aside and placed their hands upon their ears, feverishly trying to stop the sound.

Palab and Etah's roar had lasted for nearly a minute, each taking a deep breath when needed and continuing the roar, but the brutes shock and fear would only last for so long. One of the brutes worked up the nerve, pushed aside his concern and took aim with his plasma rifle.

A bolt of plasma pulsed from the rifle and impacted a nearby grunt in the center of his head. The grunt tumbled backwards and the wail stopped.

Every grunt's eyes squinted, and a low growl boiled from within them. They all felt the pain of that single grunt that had just died, they all felt his heart stop, and they all heard the sob of that grunt's pack brother. Palab stepped over the body of his fallen brother, and placed his head next to his.

Etah lay silent on the ground his lifeless form grew cold, and Palab could feel it through his own skin. Palab wanted to mourn, he wanted to cry and scream, and he wanted his brother to say something, but nothing came from his mouth. He pushed his head into the crook of Etah's neck, feverishly hoping his brother would stand, but he pulled away from Etah and turned his eyes toward the brute that had fired. He stepped ahead of the grunts beside him. It seemed that a minute had passed since the brute shot his brother, but it had only been three seconds.

Palab's elbow spikes, the mark of the Grunt King, extended outward and he shouted an ear piercing scream that only the grunts understood. But with his scream came the scream of hundreds of brutes

and drones as every grunt converged on them. The grunts grabbed, clawed, bit and stabbed brutes anywhere they could. Three or four grunts at a time were jumping onto the backs of the brutes and dragging them to ground to be clawed and gutted by the ravenous grunts.

The brutes were overwhelmed and tried to retreat but the blood thirsty grunts had massed together, and swarmed like an army of ants. The brutes fought as best they could but terror had consumed them. Dozens of grunts pulled brutes apart; tossing their limbs freely into the wind. The brutes tried to flee but there was no where to run to; the grunts were everywhere. The grunts tossed plasma grenades at or near any brute controlled vehicles and when the brutes lost control, they were quickly swarmed upon.

The drones also felt the rage of the grunts. The drones would fly into the air, well beyond the grunts reach, but they were quickly shot down by elite piloted Phantoms or Banshees. The drones were afraid and wanted to flee, but their flying ability within gravity was limited, and when they became tired of flying they had to land, and were quickly slaughtered.

It had not dawned onto the brutes that they were completely outnumbered by the grunts. With the elite forces scattered about the galaxy, the brutes believed Dorenth to be an easy target, however they never anticipated the grunts as a factor. The brutes were outnumbered by the grunts ten-to-one. The odds had always been in the elites favor, that just had not utilized their sources affectively; thinking the grunts were nothing more then cannon fodder.

Simyaldee and Balmaeda turned their attention to Palab, as the snarling grunts overran the brutes around them. They walked up to the grunt Messiah and watched as he tearfully stared at his brother's prone body. Palab sat quietly next to Etah and lowered his head. The grunts were taking care of the fight and he didn't need to help. His elbow spikes retracted and his only focus was on honoring his fallen kin and making sure that he never forgot his older brother. He quickly drifted off to sleep, and in his restful state his mind flowed free. He thought only of his kin and his brother, and in his dreams he could see them all. This war had cost them their lives, but he could still honor them and mourn for them in his dreams.

This was the way of the grunt, even in rest they would offer up homage to the spirits of their dead. Long ago they put away burial rights, or burning the corpses, the body was merely a vessel containing their spirits and they were honored in the communion of their minds. Sleeping fooled the Covenant overlords into thinking that grunts were lazy and useless, but the grunts had a higher calling then even the prophets could understand. In their restful state they were together, the dead and the unborn mixing with the living. This was their connection and their way of honoring the fallen. But the grunts also used the moment to rest, whenever possible.

Balmaeda sat quietly beside Palab and watched closely not knowing what Palab was actually doing. Grunts had always been able to sleep at the weirdest times, he thought to himself, but he saw a single tear roll from Palab's eyes as the little grunt snored softly. He quickly stood and gave Palab the privacy he needed and looked over the battle field.

"I will stand and watch over the Sergeant and make sure nothing happens to him while he rests." Balmaeda stated as he gestured toward Simyaldee.

"Very well. I'll go back to the station and send for the High Council, they will be delighted to hear that we have retaken the city. But this war is far from over. Thankfully, the grunts are on our side."

"Since our arrival Palab has not said that he will join his grunts with us." Belmaeda stated with a confused tone. "What makes you think that he will continue to fight at our side? We can't force them, not now that he leads them all."

Simyaldee quickly retorted, "His brother was just killed by a Brute. Palab may want his kin to go home, but there is nothing that will give him more satisfaction then revenge against the brutes. He's not like the other grunts. He's a warrior, like us. The grunts will continue to fight with us. Unfortunately, that is the way it must be, if we are to win." Simyaldee began to walk away, but turned to Balmaeda one last time. "Before the Prophets turned on us, you were next in line to join the council. Your son was going to take your seat upon the Mirrator. Do not forget his death, you who was once known as Balmaedree. The brutes shall not be spared any quarter."

"My child died in combat. With that knowledge I can gladly accept his death. The name Balmaedree has no meaning for me anymore, and soon I will join the council and help lead our kin into a peaceful future." Balmaeda nodded his head to the Mirrator Second and returned his gaze upon the resting Palab.

Balmaeda sadly knew that Simyaldee was right, about everything. No matter what, the Grunts had to continue fighting. If the grunts didn't, then the tide of the war would surely fall to the brutes; the elite forces were scattered around the galaxy. Simyaldee was also right about his son, Yammaeda. How could he ever forget that the brutes killed his only child? Never would he forget, but he knew that anger would not bring him tranquility. Upon the council, he could make changes, he could show all of his kin how to rebuild and defend. No, his place was no longer as a warrior, but as a member of the High Council of Elites. For far too long he had been fighting, secretly killing for the council, but now it was time to change. Balmaeda stood tall and brushed his feelings to the side.

A few minutes passed and the grunts in the area began to return to Palab's side. The brutes near the station had been slain and one by one they sat next to him or as close as they could. The grunts that had never met Palab instantly felt his presence and eagerly awaited his leadership. They sat quietly, some slept, and some patiently waited for their Messiah to speak. Soon Balmaeda was surrounded by a sea of grunts, all encircled around the resting body of Palab, and his departed pack brother, Etah.

The other elites began sorting through the bodies of their fallen brothers. The elite's numbers had been severely reduced, but there were survivors scattered all across the planet and numerous smaller cities that hadn't been attacked. The brutes had been stalled for the mean time, but surely the prophets were not going to give up. More

brutes, jackals and drones would be coming, and the elites were well aware that they didn't have much time. But something began to gnaw at the back of Balmaeda's mind. Why Dorenth?

For decades the Prophets were obsessed with humans and killing them, but now, they seemed split between attacking the humans home planet, a world called Earth, and the elite world of Dorenth. Balmaeda knew that this was a pointless strategy. The goal for the prophets, for the Covenant, had always been the Great Journey. Why now were they splitting their forces? Why focus on the elites, his kin? At this stage of the war, humanity was a far greater threat.

Balmaeda's thoughts were interrupted as several ships began to lift off from the perimeter of the city; the very ships that the brutes had used during their initial assault. The Covenant was in full retreat, but the elites knew that they would be back, and the Prophets would surely bring more forces than before, but again Balmaeda thought; why?

Balmaeda smiled as he watched several of the ships begin to accelerate into the sky, but then explode as they reached upper orbit.

"I wonder how many of their ships the Knight and Piercing Arrow will shoot down?" Balmaeda questioned to himself. He was happy to know that the Knight and Piercing Arrow was still fighting and hopefully several other elite controlled ships had survived as well.

Ship after ship began crashing back into the atmosphere and burning up as they tumbled through the sky. The brutes were so desperate to retreat that they didn't prepare for ship to ship combat; the elite cruisers made short work of them. Streaks of debris soared overhead as the Covenant ships were sunk one by one, but some escaped the elite's attacks. Eventually some of the Covenant ships slipped by, but the Knight and Piercing Arrow didn't pursue. The massive carrier slowly entered orbit and made a barring toward the City of Jogrennilee, and made preparations to hover over the city. Balmaeda sighed softly as the ship came into view and began to block out the sun.

"We have won this battle, but the war isn't over." Balmaeda mumbled to himself. Survivors needed to be found, defenses had to be rebuilt, and the elites as a whole needed to understand that things must change. The grunts had won this battle, and if the elites could not learn to respect Palab and his kin, then they would eventually turn on them. In the eyes of the other elites, Palab and his kin were only grunts.

Palab awakened from his dreams and looked away from his brother's body. He was surrounded by grunts on all sides. They sat patiently and eager to hear his words; his leadership. Palab stood to his feet and every Grunt gave him their immediate attention, waking from their sleep and prayers. He was bewildered for a moment, realizing that all eyes were set on him. He looked to his side and spotted Balmaeda, and noticed that the elite had not left his side the entire time.

Balmaeda stepped closer and questioned "Sergeant, your orders?" Palab looked up and could hear the commotion amongst his grunts. He had

forgotten that only the members of his team knew that he was a Sergeant. It also shocked the other grunts to hear an elite speak to him with such respect. Balmaeda and the Mirratord warriors were the only elites that respected the grunts but it was a good sign. Palab knew that if the best of the elite warriors could respect his grunts, then perhaps things could change.

Perhaps the elites and grunts could one day be considered true allies and friends. That he could take his grunts home to live on their world in peace. But as long as the prophets still controlled the Covenant fleet then he knew there would be no time for peace. The galaxy and all life were in danger. No, going home now would be pointless. This war needed the unlimited resources of his grunts. His grunts, Palab thought to himself. At what point did he start thinking that way?

Palab stepped forward, looked at his Grunts, and began to speak to them in their native tongue. Balmaeda stepped back, and let the grunts have their moment.

- - - - -

Simyaldee walked toward the tram station and suddenly realized that he had forgotten to put away his energy sword hilts. He quickly affixed them to his harness and sighed as he stretched his fingers. He walked into the tram station door just as the tram parked at the station dock. The doors to the tram parted and the High Council members as well as elder Vornaldea appeared.

Vornaldea jumped down from the Tram platform and glared through the door to the battle torn city beyond. "It appears we have been victorious."

Simyaldee could only shake his head in disapproval. "No, elder, we have not. The grunts won this battle. We owe them our gratitude."

"You speak nonsense, second." Vornaldea barked. "No grunt to kill a brute."

"It was their vast numbers that granted them victory in.."

"Again you speak of the grunts. Surely it was you and the Mirratord. I will not give the grunts â€|"

Simyaldee stepped closer to Vornaldea. "If I am out of line, then remove my rank, but I know what it is that I have seen. Out there, amongst the bodies of our fallen kin, and the corpses of our dead enemies is the new Grunt King."

Vornaldea stood in shock, "another has been born?"

"Elder, let me tell you of my newest warrior within the Mirratord. His name is Sergeant Palab, and he is the King of the Grunts."

"But the last king, he killedâ€|"

Simyaldee cut in, "...an Arbiter. Yes, I remember my studies of the Grunt Rebellion. But before you panic, let me tell you more about this new leader of the grunts, and why we must embrace them as our

alliesâ€| and not our tools." Acceptance of the grunts would not be an easy task. It would take time to convince his brothers of the Sangheili to change their views of the grunts, but Simyaldee knew that the change needed to begin.

\_End.\_

\_"Stand, five feet high"

> Written and Created by Soulguard<br> Characters based on the characters from Halo, Halo 2

> Based on the Video Game Halo, Halo 2<br> HaloÂ© Bungie Microsoft Game Studios

> Halo 2Â© Bungie Microsoft Game Studios<em>

-----

\*\*So we come to the end of Book 1. This will be ready for PDF format soon enough and available at my website within a few days. Now for those of you who have yet to read it, book 2 is already available. YUP... it is here and you can read it at your disposal. It has all new characters as well as a few from here, but no worries, the grunts are still king. click on my name at the top of the page and read "If I Were Your Hero". It starts of well enough, and don't worry too much about a lot of the grammer misques, they will be corrected eventually.\*\*

\*\*Book 3 is still in the works. I have the idea in my head, but I can't do much until I'm sure of the Halo 3 plotline. Hopefully we will get a new game or books before the fall so that I can get started on it, but currently that is all I'm waiting for. Well.. that's it for now, more info soon enough. I will also be posting a few more side/short stories to this triliogy, so you may want to add me to your "Author Alerts" list, that way you'll know when I post a new story. Til then... see round the web.\*\*

\*\*soulguard\*\*

End  
file.